

Analysis of public policy changes: the neo-institutionalist perspective

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Abstract

This article aims to analyze the potential of New Institutionalism, especially in its historical version, for explaining public policy changes. The perspective at stake has been developed relying on theoretical heterogeneity as a basis, with an emphasis on stability, and, when it focuses on change, on the prominence of exogenous factors. However, the recent theoretical renewal of this area has allowed the emergence of analytical models attentive to the various types of change and the *institutional dynamics* – a term that refers to the connection between institutional factors and political processes. The contribution of this reformulation and its analytical potential, especially for public policy changes, guided the theoretical research whose results are presented in this article.

Key words public policy; institutional change; new institutionalism.

Análise de mudanças em políticas públicas: a perspectiva neoinstitucionalista

Resumo

O objetivo deste artigo é analisar o potencial do Novo Institucionalismo, especialmente em sua versão histórica, para a explicação de mudanças em políticas públicas. A perspectiva em questão tem se desenvolvido com base na heterogeneidade teórica, com ênfase na estabilidade, e, quando enfoca a mudança, no relevo de fatores exógenos. No entanto, a renovação teórica recente dessa área possibilitou o surgimento de modelos analíticos atentos aos diferentes tipos de mudança e à *dinâmica institucional* – termo que remete à conexão entre fatores institucionais e processos políticos. A contribuição dessa reformulação e seu potencial analítico, em especial para mudanças em políticas públicas, orientaram a pesquisa teórica cujos resultados são apresentados neste artigo.

Palavras-chave políticas públicas; mudança institucional; novo institucionalismo.

Análisis de cambios en políticas públicas: la perspectiva neo-institucionalista

Resumen

El objetivo de este artículo es analizar el potencial del Nuevo Institucionalismo, especialmente en su versión histórica, para explicar cambios en políticas públicas. La perspectiva en cuestión se ha desarrollado basándose en la heterogeneidad teórica, con énfasis en la estabilidad y, cuando se centra en el cambio, en la prominencia de factores exógenos. Sin embargo, la reciente renovación teórica de esta área ha permitido el surgimiento de modelos analíticos atentos a los diversos tipos de cambio y a la *dinámica institucional* – término que se refiere a la conexión entre factores institucionales y procesos políticos. La contribución de esta reformulación y su potencial analítico, especialmente para cambios en las políticas públicas, guiaron la investigación teórica cuyos resultados se presentan en este artículo.

Palabras clave políticas públicas; cambio institucional; nuevo institucionalismo.

Introduction

The field public policy studies is eminently multidisciplinary and this has various analytical emphases. In it, several knowledge areas hold specific debates and promote the most varied perspectives on the set of government actions, also diverse in their objectives and means. As a sub-area of political science, public policy studies – the State at work – incorporate a set of analytical approaches and models that think of these policies as something subsequent to their results, with particular interest in generating knowledge on the interaction between *policies* and *politics* (Dryzek & Dunleavy, 2009; Hay & Lister, 2006).

As one of the most prominent approaches in contemporary political science, New Institutionalism is one of the perspectives most interested in explaining a latent question, transverse to public policies, whatever the sector involved or the territory in which it applies:

- Why many public policies cannot manage to change previously established standards, and/or even overcome some obstacles, so as not to produce the results expected by their formulators and decision-makers, even when undergoing legal-institutional change processes?

And, also:

- When public policies can achieve substantive changes, why, and how?

While seriously interested in answering questions like these, it is a fact that New Institutionalism faces challenges in pursuit of this purpose. They traditionally express due to some reasons, namely: the conceptual diversity itself; its power to explain the persistence of institutions over time; and when focusing on change, its tendency to concentrate on those that are radical, as a result of crises or significant modifications in the context where public policies are inserted. However, such characteristics have been rethought by authors in the area, so that theoretical renovations and development of analytical models based on empirical research capable to explain change processes in their most varied forms are already visible. Increasingly, change and stability are addressed as interconnected phenomena in the same institutional dynamics that expresses commitments and disputes between ideas and political players.

By bringing a speculative discussion on three vicissitudes of the approach at stake (theoretical heterogeneity; emphasis on stability; and focus on exogenous factors to explain change), this article argues that New Institutionalism incorporates a set of critiques and innovations that constitute, in fact, one of the main theoretical-analytical options for studying changes in public policies. In the first part, we introduce an overview of how the various versions of institutionalism – rational, sociological, and historical choice – define institutions (hence public policies) and comprise institutional change. Then, with a deepening of the historical perspective, we show the recent concern of theorists in the area

to go beyond analyses focused only on stability of institutions and exogenous variables, as well as on grasping various types of change. In the third part, we introduce some analytical possibilities that strengthen the role of players and ideas in change processes of public policies, in order to increase the interaction of structural and dynamic factors when defining research designs. Finally, we draw our final remarks.

Multiple ways to think of public policies and their changes

New Institutionalism has been internally distinguished by having three versions as a basis – rational, sociological, and historical choice –, which show their own perspectives on what institutions are, how they persist in time or get modified, and which aspects must be focused when studying them. The rational choice stems from the field of economics (Weingast, 1996) and this lies on the fact that (individual and collective) players have preferences for certain outcomes, seeking to maximize such preferences when devising strategies and means to achieve their aims. Named as *calculist* by Hall and Taylor (2003), this choice invokes different contexts to solve the strategic problems inherent to interactions between players and institutions.

Concerned with the consequences of institutional arrangements, some authors in this school emphasize that institutions are able to constrain and encourage prefixed preferences and self-interested behavior, as they produce a context of social interaction, in which strategies are devised and choices are made. A set of rules creates a structure of greater stability and/or predictability to human behavior, governed by cost-benefit calculation, not necessarily effective, but capable of guiding human interaction and reducing transaction costs, making economic and social coordination easier. Thus, given the issue of uncertainty, imperfection of information available in the settings of political choices, and the inevitable interaction of players, the institutions' consists in establishing the way how the game is played by groups and/or individuals (North, 1990), in order to define prescriptions for actions that involve strategic calculations regarding internal factors (expected benefits, expected costs, and discount rates) and external factors (shared standards, opportunities, information, sanctions) (Ostrom, 1999).

The sociological approach, as an alternative to explanations of rational choice, resorts to concepts of sociology and cognitive psychology, more precisely within the theoretical framework of organizational theory, in order to explain institutions and changes. This trend considers institutions in a broader scope and includes, in its conceptual perspective, the cultural component. Institution is understood as a set of rules and procedures associated with social constructions that create patterns of meaning, such as symbolic systems, cognitive schemas, and shared moral models, by providing patterns of meaning that

routinely guide human behavior in various spheres of human life (Hall & Taylor, 2003). In general, this approach is opposed to the idea of institutional effectiveness and explains that institutions persist through transmission mechanisms related to the cultural component of society. It also believes that expectations for problem-solving alternatives are highly dependent on the information generated and communicated through political connections within an institution and its broader social context.

From this viewpoint, a tension between public policies and the environment in which they are inserted is noticed, since, as the latter changes much more rapidly than the institutions, the change of practices requires a complex adaptation and organizational learning process, and lasting changes are more likely to occur when strategies are devised to deal with systems of symbols and meanings of the organizational and social culture which a policy is inserted in. Therefore, the feasibility of a proposed change depends on the ability of policymakers and decision-makers to exploit collective feelings conducive to long-term change and attention (and inattention) of other players to some issues crucial for change, as well as to exploit the deployment strategies in broad time horizons, in order to produce less resistance among players opposed to changes (March & Olsen, 2008; Olsen, 2014). In other words, it is emphasized that the adoption of new institutional ways and practices needs to guarantee some adequacy to a wider set of cultural and social values (Hall & Taylor, 2003; Powell & DiMaggio, 1991).

The third trend, historical institutionalism, means that institutions are constituted by procedures, protocols, standards, and conventions inherent to the organizational structure, something which produces a strategic context for players to define their strategies and pursue their interests. However, not in the sense of self-interested behavior of rational choice, since preferences are created on a social and political basis; nor with a cultural-driven emphasis of the sociological version. In turn, the power asymmetries underlined by historical institutionalism bring it closer to rational choice and farer from sociological institutionalism, which emphasizes the interpretation and legitimation processes (Hall & Taylor, 2003).

When paying particular attention to unequal power distribution, historical institutionalists reinforce that political power is not a static attribute of certain players, as well as the resources to think of contingencies and causality in policy making (Hall & Taylor, 2003; Pierson & Skocpol, 2008; Thelen & Steinmo, 1994). By claiming that “we have to go back and look at” (Pierson, 2000), public policies are collective constructs that provide structuring action repertoires which can affect institutional change. They are influenced by past decisions and institutions, which generate long-term effects, although without fixed outcomes (Hall & Taylor, 2003; Pierson & Skocpol, 2008; Thelen, 2004). When changes occur, they do not necessarily derive from effective choices, since a number of specific

conditions are needed so that players identify some alternatives as plausible possibilities (Pierson & Skokpol, 2008; Thelen, 2004).

In fact, internal differentiations reflect different ontological, epistemological, and methodological premises, but all tend to draw our attention to some elements in the analysis of continuity and changes in public policies. One is considering the endogeneity of public policies, since 'institutions matter' because they constitute the context where the interaction between players takes place. This implies considering in research designs factors related to formal and/or informal institutions (rules, standards, values, time, adaptation, etc.), players' role in explaining changes (they act in institutional contexts and operate by producing intentional and unintentional mechanisms that produce change) and the connections between strategic interests and context that generate reflexivity as for the possibilities of change. In fact, the various approaches provide different weights to institutional factors, as well as to the connection between public policy and changes in the environment, but they increasingly converge to a point: grasping the interaction between players, institutions, and change.

Emphasis on stability and on exogenous variables?

It is true that institutionalism, especially the historical one, at its dawn, was enthusiastic about the discovery of the power of causal mechanisms related to order, structure, and time. This stimulated the early theorists in this approach to obstruct analyses on political life in terms of groups and against structural-functionalism. In its efforts to overcome social-driven analysis, this favored a structuralist, sometimes reductionist, thinking by means of an inflexible use of the notion that political institutions structure social interactions in order to engender political and economic situations. The propensity to improve order and structure, and minimize the role of human agency and ideas, left room for much of this literature to keep the substantive complexity of political change away. That is, many of its comparative studies were marked by static analyses (Hall & Taylor, 2003; Immergut, 2007; Lieberman, 2002).

To explain institutional change, a first generation of historical institutionalists pointed out exogenous shocks that trigger radical institutional reconfigurations, in view of changes based on endogenous advances that often unfold incrementally. Thus, changes have begun to be clarified through the idea of punctuated balance, whose essence is shown by the apparent distinction between the institutional innovation dynamics, on the one hand, and institutional reproduction, on the other, the first being triggered by occasional and turbulent moments of crisis and/or critical situations (Krasner 1988 as quoted in Mahoney & Thelen, 2010; Thelen, 2004; Thelen & Steinmo, 1994).

Surely, this has become an elegant label to keep the assumption that *history matters*, while expressing little clearness about the effects of decision-making processes over time, with confusing and poorly exploited normative implications, something which results in explaining stability, but with serious problems for grasping change. Explanations of changes by means of extraordinary events, capable of abruptly and discontinuously modifying institutions, have led to an imprecise understanding of the interaction between institutional constraint and political strategies, in which the very foundations pointing out that *institutions matter* have been relativized, since they were able to explain the political outcomes only in stability periods. That is, the conflict became seriously harassed in formative moments, but forgotten in times regarded as stable. This might be a clear mistake, because pressures for change do not cease, even when political alliances take a certain pathway (Peters, 2000; Thelen & Steinmo, 1994).

So, another serious problem was observed when addressing public policy changes from the perspective of historical institutionalism: the emphasis on exogenous variables. To sum up, scholars from the institutions suggest, in various ways, that internal institutional processes affect many aspects of politics, such as distribution of power and preferences. When they insist on the importance of grasping how interests and preferences evolve in the context of institutional action, the ways how power reputations evolve as a result of political outcomes or the ways how the process to control organizations with certain purposes produces unintended consequences, in general, suggesting that institutions shape political conflict by means of factors that do not necessarily involve external pressures or the outcomes themselves, that is, the factors are eminently endogenous. However, when it is overlooked that institutions simultaneously trigger stability and change processes, historical institutionalism fails to capture endogenous factors capable of explaining the reasons why some changes break more with previous patterns than others. In other words, when neglecting the environment, regarding the sustainability of institutionalist theories, it is necessary to specify how endogenous factors help grasping the change processes, also in order to provide the whole theoretical framework with meaning (Greif & Laitin, 2004; Lieberman, 2002; Mahoney & Thelen, 2010; Weir, 1993).

Another aspect that needs to be carefully addressed consists of *simplifications* or *incomplete conceptualizations* of the notion of change, whose main consequence is the inability to adequately incorporate it into analytical frameworks (Peters, Pierre, & King, 2005). In other words, the fact that the approach has prioritized the analysis of large events and the definition of large periods for empirical analysis masks the fact that some changes occur incrementally, something which also requires time spent on analysis. This ends up making the demands to recognize a change as such excessively high, consequently reducing most or all observable changes for stability purposes. For instance, in the case of institutional changes in the political economies of today's advanced capitalist societies,

there are modifications associated with significant political renegotiation of the postwar market economy. Particularly intriguing is the fact that this broad and multifaceted progress largely unfolds incrementally, without dramatic breaks, such as the wars and revolutions, which characterized the first half of the 20th century. Therefore, the pressing inference is that a key and defining characteristic of world liberalization consists in an institutional evolution in a gradual, conditioned, and limited way by the very postwar institutions that are under renovation or even diluting (Streeck & Thelen, 2005).

An interesting typology points out that there are at least four types of change, which may be identified through the distinction and combination of a kind of (incremental or abrupt) change process and its outcome (continuity or discontinuity). A first type, named as *break and replacements*, refers to changes highlighted by the tradition of punctuated balance and focusing on abrupt processes. This reading even recognizes that there are incremental changes, but only sees them as fundamentally reactive and adaptive, serving to protect institutional continuity. From another viewpoint, it is often considered that, despite the existence of historical breakpoints, there is only an immediate appearance of substantive change, because, over time, the results consist in institutions' conservation. Such changes are named as *survival or return*. From another perspective, incremental changes may have two major and contrasting effects. In the case that leads to continuities, there is a change named as *reproduction by adaptation*, or simply *institutional reproduction*. In this type there is a complexity that also draws attention, because it reveals that institutions almost always cannot be regarded as frozen residues of critical moments, or even as being tied to the past – as arguments set in the pathway dependency suggest, since, in politics, the institutional reproduction may be only partially understood in terms of increasing the effects of incremental returns. Only partially because institutional survival often involves active political renegotiation and heavy doses of institutional adjustment, in order to bring institutions inherited from the past in some tune with changes in the political, economic, and/or social context. In the case of *gradual transformations*, it is pointed out that, although less dramatic than abrupt processes, institutions, once created, often change subtly and gradually over time, in order to substantively change the patterns of human behavior and the political outcomes (Streeck & Thelen, 2005; Thelen, 2004).

Mahoney and Thelen (2010) also point out variations in gradual changes. In *layering*, new rules are introduced, superimposed on existing ones, in order to involve small reviews or additions to institutions. These small changes may, over time, accumulate and involve significant changes in the rationale or institutional commitments on the part of the original core established. Other changes are named as *drift*, whose characteristics indicate that there is a strong gap between the rules and reality, since the rules remain formally having a reduced impact due to the environments where they take place. In such cases, a public policy does not keep pace with changes in the context and gaps in the rules allow players

to choose not to act on changes in the environment. On the other hand, in *displacement*, public policies that had been suspended or suppressed are reactivated by stakeholders in an institutional way alternative to that in force. Instead of supplementing a new institution, as in the case of layering, institutions are formally introduced and compete directly with the existing one. Some gradual changes occur through *conversion*, which represents the redirection of goals, functions, and purposes, due to new challenges or power relation changes. Rules are interpreted and executed in new ways, due to strategic readjustments. Usually, this occurs when the rules are ambiguous enough to allow different interpretations. Some players' action can convert new goals and functions for institutions. In some cases, these results imply incorporation of new supports or incorporation of power into new coalitions, which, instead of dismantling the old institutions, use them in new ways.

Nevertheless, despite the fact that political conflict and dissent have been insufficiently exploited by institutionalist researchers to explain changes in public policies, today the neo-institutionalist theoretical arsenal is more robust to explain discontinuities (Immergut, 2006; Weir, 2006). Today, it is far more common to analyze worries about changes in less exceptional circumstances, and explanations about 'why' and 'how' policies lose support over time. In seeking to overcome static comparative analyses, a generation of researchers has produced a set of sensitive analytical and conceptual transformations, including new concepts, analytical categories, and causal mechanisms to see change more appropriately, reducing the causal emphasis on exogenous factors and overcoming the boundaries of stability-driven models. Such innovations have resorted to a set of endogenous and dynamic factors of institutions, something which is equivalent to a greater analytical importance to conflict and to imbalances that result from players' clashes of ideas, preference, values, and interests (Immergut, 2006; Rezende, 2012).

By broadening the view of the links between institutions and political processes, in contrast to the mechanical and static analyses, which often came to institutional determinism, consistent studies are well known to combine endogenous and exogenous factors (Immergut, 1992; Rezende, 2012). In such a movement, the very concept of change expands, increasing the possibilities to settle the controversy between those who look at the glass half full of water (change) and those who look at the glass half empty (stability).

Institutional dynamism: some analytical models

In time, the difficulties in explaining change are expressions of the cross-sectional dilemma with regard to other approaches to political science, and hence institutionalism, defined by a *trade off* between structure and agency. It is common for social theory, especially political theory, to require choices between concentration on structural factors or agents of change, often generating effects that exaggerate some explanations to

the detriment of others. Such an inevitability inherent to the vicissitudes of knowledge production, however, cannot justify something usual: researchers avoid the risk of instability in their interpretations of the social world (Peters, 2000). Thus, even if all the embedded problems are not obliterated when someone prefers a theory or approach, it seems to be key that researchers focus more on the ongoing process of interaction between institutions and players, especially to grasp change production and even the replacement of some institutions by others.

One premise of studies interested in institutional dynamism is that political institutions do not operate in a vacuum and that, inevitably, they interact with a socioeconomic and political context. Therefore, even if institutions are themselves resistant to change, their impact on political outcomes may change over time in a subtle way in response to changes around them. Another agreement is that players struggle to define institutions, as well as the outcomes of public policies. Therefore, the players and battles outlined in institutions are extremely relevant and they must be observed. Finally, exploiting the relation between ideas and the new public policy setting is encouraged. In this regard, a compelling argument emerges: instead of putting everything that belongs to the domain of ideas in parentheses, or treating them as a variable dissociated from material interests, it is best to exploit them along with players' material interests and both of them in an institutional context, as factors that can produce change in public policies (Thelen & Steinmo, 1994).

With an objection to the parameters based on human intentionality, for instance, Hodgson (2006) proposed the analysis of interaction between individuals and the social structure that surrounds them, in whose institutional structure and human agency change plays a central role. According to the author, although each player is unique with regard to his/her cognition abilities and is a subject who takes action, the acquisition of the means to grasp the world involves social interaction processes, which refers to an individual choice conditioned by the social structure which such individuals are immersed in. Consequently, it is the very incorporation of rules into the individuals' thinking and behavior the reason why institutions work and create the sensitivity to change. In other words, usually people grasp the rules and choose to follow them not only due to the incentives and disincentives involved, but also because they are able to interpret them and give them some value, something which is inevitably a social interaction process. Therefore, in order to lead new laws to become rules, in the sense of players' behavior setting, they have to become routine. In this rationale, the key mechanism for this transformation is habit itself, seen as agents' willingness to engage in previously adopted or acquired behaviors or thoughts, triggered by an adequate stimulus or context.

When looking for rather robust explanations of the analysis of change, Greif (2003 as quoted in Rezende, 2012) created a model that sees that institutions contain malleable elements. By means of a combination of repeated game theory and historical institutionalism,

institutions are regarded as 'quasi-parametric' (variable, dynamic), which have institutional elements that can be modified over time. The mechanisms that explain changes are found in the erosion of players' beliefs and behaviors towards the institution, which occurs in interactions – the players' interpretation of incentives changes, so, the institutions move. Based on this model, which supports the thesis that institutions produce institutional change when the connections between expected beliefs and behaviors become fragile over time, three possibilities for change are specified by the degree to which they may be observed. Barely observable or uncertain changes might be produced by mechanisms that associate players' willingness to face risks and ambiguities with needs of players who better know the context of change. In a second type, old behaviors, identified as inadequate (associated with models driven by critical events), are radically abandoned. A third sees that players change their behavior because they interpret to be progressively less sustainable with regard to the institution. Therefore, processes of erosion and institutional reinforcement might explain changes (Greif, 2003 as quoted in Rezende, 2012).

With another tone, the solution proposed by Lieberman (2002) gathers ideational and institutional factors. As opposed to the emphasis on analysis of structure, organizational aggregate, or behavioral regularities as the main driving force behind political behavior, politics is situated in a multiple, and not necessarily balanced, order. So, overlaps, interconnections, and conflicts inherent to the political field are recognized, with an emphasis on tensions between the ideas of players and institutions. In this regard, as interests and goals are not taken for granted, human action, stimulated by ideas, can challenge the constraints of political and social structures and create political possibilities. Hence, change stems from 'friction' between incompatible institutional and ideational patterns. For analyzing, the proposal lies on shedding some light on friction points, irregularities, and discontinuities that drive political change, capable of leading to a reformulation of incentives and opportunities for political players.

A counterpoint to the *multiple-order* perspective proposed by Lieberman (2002) was introduced by Smith (2006 as quoted in Rezende, 2012), according to whom ideas matter in politics and, often, changes occur via interaction between multiple orders, each of them having partially autonomous, almost always conflicting, development dynamics. However, the author argues about the need to better define what political orders are and the relationship between ideas and institutions within them. Based on the empirical study of racial politics in the United States of America (USA) and having a rather grounded constitution in the tradition of ideas, Smith (2006 as quoted in Rezende, 2012) suggests that a political order has general goals expressed in rules, policies, and the roles they enact, and that ideologies (often superimposed rather than identical) help explaining why various components of a political order adhere to them. According to the author, the ideas themselves do not produce political changes except for being incorporated and supported

by political institutions, groups, and particular players. In other words, although they are constitutive elements of such orders, ideas are always taken by organizations or a set of them within a coalition, something which implies the need to always analyze change in a historical political context. In other words, the proposal is that ideas and institutions are considered in the same analytical framework.

When studying the U.S. employment policy, Weir (1993, 2006) explained the reasons why periodic innovation, in which government's role was expanded in terms of employment, lost much ground in a broader historical pathway. In this study, the author's claim is that the interaction between ideas and politics, over time, can create a *bounded innovation* pattern, characterized by growing unlikelihood that some ideas influence politics, revealing that some policies are more plausible than others. This is caused by the creation of institutions that funnel the flow of ideas, create incentives for particular political players, and constrain political choices, promoting an adjustment of ideas and interests. Also, the arena where a policy is debated and decided focuses on the formation of coalitions that, as products of political processes, influence the possibilities for groups to recognize and build common interests. As coalitions are contingent, that is, there is no guarantee they remain over time, as the redefinition of material ideas and interests occurs, as well as players recombine according to political contexts and institutions, they generate support or reject the public policy proposals. It is *institutional dissonance* that offers opportunities for new alliances to promote change, led by *policy entrepreneurs*.

Variations in the types of gradual change are study objects in Streeck and Thelen (2005) and Mahoney and Thelen (2010) and they provide clues about the causal mechanisms that may explain change processes. Following the reasoning of other studies, these authors draw attention to characteristics of the political context and of the institutions themselves, as well as to the type of player dominating change. The authors point out that the types of gradual institutional change are defined by combining characteristics of the institutions and the political context. As for the institutions' characteristics, it is worth recalling that the rules produce uncertainties, either because their formulators are not the ones who apply them, or due to the diversity of contexts in which they are applied. Thus, it is crucial to verify how institutions provide opportunities so that players and coalitions exercise discretion (institutional openness to interpretation and variation in rule support) when interpreting the rules or reinforcing them. Although there may be various origins for discretion, the key is grasping that it varies between players.

In relation to the context, the key is verifying the veto power of defenders of the institution's *status quo*, whether strong or weak, which concerns players' access to institutional and political means to block change. Stability stems from the continued mobilization of political resources and the overcoming of conflicts by players, something which indicates that, even if there is a potential power fluctuation, the *status quo* remains.

In this rationale, players' *compliance* is a relevant factor, since "the typical ambiguity of institutions generates spaces of interpretation, debate, and contestation on the part of players, bringing possibilities for endogenous change." That is, there are conflicts with regard to meaning, application, and modes of resource allocation that generate new institutional models. Therefore, coalition values, beliefs, preferences, and identities must be observed, as well as the political conflicts that drive change process in various contexts and conditions, seeking to identify the dynamic mechanisms that constitute coalitions for rule enforcement (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010).

In short, we cannot expect homogeneity in studies that focus on institutional dynamism. There is a great variety of studies and various attempts to contribute on a theoretical and analytical basis to understanding change, each with a particular zeal and attention. Having them as a basis, both key elements were identified for this research and steps were taken to reach some inferential degree.

Final remarks

As in any other theoretical choice, it is necessary to situate the potential of New Institutionalism through limitations of its own. There is heterogeneity in this perspective, as well as some paradoxes that should be considered by researchers to broaden their skills in the analysis of empirical and theoretical issues. If institutions constitute the rules of a game, being relatively durable over time and needed to establish a certain predictability in the agents' behavior, how could we clarify changes by means of parameters that explain stability? Despite the theoretical dilemma of this issue, it mobilized a series of conceptual and analytical reviews, providing New Institutionalism with greater capacity to interconnect the institutional reproduction processes that are inseparable from change.

In fact, internal differentiations between neo-institutionalist approaches reflect various ontological, epistemological, and methodological premises they mobilize. However, all of them point out the importance of institutions for political analysis, since they create greater regularity in the behavior of players who dispute ideas and try to imprint their interests. Perhaps, it is more fruitful than reinforcing differences that a researcher accepts the elements inherent to variations that constitute New Institutionalism, surveying the aspects that unite the various approaches. Yet, seeing that there is a shared core and accepting ambivalences must never mean neglect of difficulties they impose on the development of valid research projects.

One suggestion is for researchers to choose approaches, or even analytical models, depending on the subject and the research issues. Where consensus and/or competition between players willing to undertake strategic action is an indispensable element in

establishing or ensuring change in a policy, in decision-making arenas, the theoretical scope of rational choice may be more accurate. On the other hand, the sociological school can provide good explanations for the cases in which we want to explain the ineffectiveness of social and political institutions, since they use concepts dealing with players' learning and their interactive interpretive efforts, something which ends up favoring the choice of alternatives that represent preexisting models. In contrast, historical institutionalists perform better when explaining situations with a power conflict between players, whose interests compete. Undoubtedly, what is most relevant is that researchers avoid worrying more about cases that support theoretical predilections than with explaining empirical issues.

A further point we want to highlight is that, although almost all institutions' definitions reinforce relatively long lasting characteristics of political and social life, implying a behavior structuring that favors the difficult modification of public policies, the theoretical perspective marked herein is capable to analyze change. Not only in situations of a break with old patterns, but also in situations with gradual and complex, endogenous, changes, built over time and having significant consequences, although they occur silently.

Of course, research designs should not neglect understanding the political context that goes beyond institutions, although the specification of endogenous factors is also indispensable for explaining change. The optimal scenario consists in designing and/or devising analytical models that allow identifying the institutional legacy and rules, as well as the ideas and players in disputes within particular contexts. Undoubtedly, the interaction of these factors affects the commitments generated, the political direction, and the pace of change. Without ignoring exogenous factors, because variations in political conjunctures may interfere with pre-established dynamics, a sharp look at institutional dynamics allows a researcher to recognize and analyze the specific causal mechanisms that connect players, institutions, and changes.

Finally, we claim that, although New Institutionalism still flirts with certain determinism, it is a mistake, at least nowadays, to accuse it of devoting attention only to the structural factors of a public policy, thus, that it is only effective to explain the persistence of such an initiative. Increasingly, this perspective advances in the joint analysis of human structure and agency, and it also means that continuity and change in politics are interconnected in the same institutional dynamics, so that it is very useful for the analysis of public policies.

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How to cite this article:

ABNT

ARAÚJO, C. E. L.; CUNHA, E. S. M. Analysis of public policy changes: the neo-institutionalist perspective. *Conhecer: Debate entre o Público e o Privado*, n. 22, p. 170-187, 2019.

APA

Araújo, C. E. L., & Cunha, E. S. M. (2019). Analysis of public policy changes: the neo-institutionalist perspective. *Conhecer: Debate entre o Público e o Privado*, 22, 170-187.

Vancouver

Araújo CEL, Cunha ESM. Analysis of public policy changes: the neo-institutionalist perspective. *Conhecer: Debate entre o Público e o Privado* [Internet]. 2019 [cited Apr 22, 2019];(22):170-187. Available from: <https://revistas.uece.br/index.php/revistaconhecer/article/view/1030>

