POLITICAL PLACES AND INSTITUTIONAL SPACES:
The Intersection of Political Science and Political Geography

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Abstract  Political geography is one of the most exciting subdisciplines to emerge from the “spatial turn” in the social sciences. Arising largely within the discipline of geography, political geography has deep implications for political science, and yet these implications have not yet been widely recognized among political scientists. Conversely, political geographers have not yet profited enough from the rich field of political science. Political geography has the potential to dramatically transform many areas of established political science research. We focus on two: (a) the study of “contextual effects” on political behavior and (b) the study of governance by applying the “new institutionalism.” By spatializing the basic premises of these political science subfields, researchers can find new ways of looking at old questions. We conclude that political scientists should move beyond territorial questions of geography and begin thinking about the intrinsic spatiality of all political action, events, and institutions.

DEFINITIONS AND BACKGROUND

Definitions of “political geography” vary widely today, thanks to the effusive growth of this field of inquiry over more than a century. Most generally, political geography seeks to show “the relevance of the spatiality of all types of power and their interaction” (Flint 2003, p. 107). Within this most inclusive definition, the broadest division within political geography hinges on the definition of “political.” Traditionally, political geography was concerned with the environmental, regional, and spatial aspects of the state, its subdivisions, and its relationships with other states. The second, and much more recent, category defines political geography as the study of the spatial dimension of gender, class, environmental, sexual, religious, and identity politics, no matter how those politics are connected to formal state institutions (Agnew 2002, Cox 2005, Flint 2003).
Political geography as a field of inquiry dates from the founding generation of the academic discipline of geography near the turn of the twentieth century, a generation that included Friedrich Ratzel in Germany, Vidal de la Blache in France, and H.J. Mackinder in Great Britain. These writers focused principally on the nation-state and its relationship to the natural environment. Territories, boundaries, frontiers, and jurisdictions were the units of analysis. Further, these authors were deeply interested in the construction of national identities and imperial rivalries that marked the major Euro-American powers. They debated whether nations (conceived as largely homogeneous ethnoracial-descent groups) were naturally suited to natural resources or climates and to certain topographies (mountain ranges, plains, rivers, oceans). They extensively debated the question of geographical determinism in respect to “national character” (Buttimer 1978). The very term geopolitics was coined in 1899 (Agnew 2002, pp. 7–19). This kind of discourse, linked closely to policy making and diplomacy, reached its apogee in the Treaty of Versailles, which established the system of international boundaries that has recently begun to collapse or reconfigure in Eastern Europe and the Middle East.

As with many other social science fields, the 1960s and 1970s saw a far-reaching reinvention of political geography. On the one hand, what could be called mainstream political geography developed sophisticated theories and methodology to analyze a wide variety of phenomena from political identities (MacKenzie 1976) to urban power relations (Cox 1973). On the other hand, a critical or radical movement arose, from an explicitly Marxian point of departure, led primarily by Henri Lefebvre in France and David Harvey in England and the United States. Beginning with Social Justice and the City, Harvey (1973) forcefully expanded the range of political geography to encompass all the ways in which capitalist society reproduces inequality through spatial processes at all levels, from the local to the global. Revising Marx, Harvey developed new theories such as the “spatial fix” to capitalism’s recurrent crises of overproduction. But Harvey’s work was only one manifestation of a movement to broaden the definition of “political” in political geography. By the 1980s, a broad spectrum of scholars argued generally that power and geography are inextricably linked, and they sought to expose the geographical dimensions of class, race, and gender inequalities (Flint 2003). Indeed, “political” in political geography sometimes describes the author as much as it does the subjects analyzed.

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, it was safe to say that the field of political geography had fully matured. A recent four-volume anthology edited by Kevin R. Cox, Political Geography: Critical Concepts in the Social Sciences (Cox 2005), brings together more than 60 essays on issues of central concern to political science, organized by such topics as “states and their internal structure,” “states and a global context,” “identities and interests in political geography,” and “from géographie électorale to the politics of democracy.”

A great deal of the voluminous recent work published as “political geography” in the field’s leading journal, Political Geography, should be of great interest to political scientists. There is still, however, a marked professional division that
vitiates the capacity for political scientists to absorb the scholarship of this field. The overwhelming majority of authors in Political Geography are professional geographers. Remarkably, no members of the editorial board of Political Geography are listed with political science affiliations. Similarly, only a negligible number of articles in American Political Science Review, Political Science Quarterly, and the other leading journals in the political science profession mention "geography" or "space" in their titles or abstracts. This professional divide is reflected as well in a general failure of either side to borrow freely from the other, except in a handful of cases such as the path-breaking work of John Agnew and the recent work by Johnston & Pattie (2005).

Political scientists might be surprised to learn how many of their established research agendas are being studied by political geographers. International relations, state formation, political movements, political identities, voting behavior, nationalism and separatism, local governance, parliamentary or congressional behavior, policy formation, bureaucracies, and many more subjects are regularly the stuff of political geography. Political scientists presumably should be keenly interested in the theories, methods, and results used by political geographers to study these phenomena. But they may be alarmed by the rarity of citations to political science books and journals in these studies. The same neglect is found on the other side: Very few references to political geography appear in the major political science journals. In other words, two large, discursive communities are studying the same phenomena (politics in all its forms) and simply failing, overall, to take advantage of one another’s perspectives, or even to engage in a conversation.

In the following sections, we briefly discuss several specific areas of scholarship in political geography. Our purpose is to illustrate the tendency of political geographers and political scientists to talk past one another, as well as to highlight some examples of effective communication.

A Few Vital Things Political Scientists Should Know About Political Geography

The first thing political scientists must learn about political geography is that, although its subject matter is usually identical to that of political science, its analytic frameworks proceed from different and probably unfamiliar disciplinary genealogy. Geography is distinct from other disciplines for good reasons. It is founded on spatial or spatialized concepts: points, lines, polygons, distance, direction, place, area, network, path, context, scale, region, motion, boundary, borders, nodes, center, periphery, and so on. Regarding these concepts, human geography (social phenomena) differs from physical geography (natural phenomena such as ecosystems and soil erosion) in very important ways; here we are concerned only with human geography (Tuan 1974). Geographers have developed a huge range of theories about, and methods of working with, these concepts to study social phenomena, and these require sustained study if taken seriously.
For reasons of space (pardon the pun), we have chosen two areas where dialogue between political science and political geography is not only possible but, we feel, necessary: contextual effects on political behavior and governance in American political development (APD). We explore these two areas in some depth to illustrate the great implications of spatialization for political scientists.

THE SPATIALITY OF POLITICAL BEHAVIOR

One of the most important sources of the near universal lack of concern for geography among political scientists is the behavioral revolution of the 1950s–1960s. Its exclusive focus on the individual as the primary unit of analysis in political science led to ontological individualism—the assumption that individuals are the beginning and end of the political world. They can be aggregated, but even in the aggregate they behave autonomously in relation to other individuals and their surrounding environment, and so their individual point of view, as rational actors who pursue their self-interest, should be the primary concern of political science. Theory and practice of ontological individualism were tied closely together through the proliferation of survey data and expertise in formal causal modeling (Agnew 1996b). With the rise of ontological individualism, political behavior research has focused ever more tightly on the processes of individual decision making and attitude formation. The American Voter (Campbell et al. 1960) heralded a revolution in survey methods and concluded that individual partisan attachment was the primary cause of voting behavior. From there the questions asked by political scientists moved deeper into individual attitudes. Do issues matter at all to individual voters? If so, is the economy the only issue? What about religion? Do voters make their rational decision calculations prospectively or retrospectively? Do campaigns persuade individual voters on the issues, or are elections only about individual attitudes regarding candidate personality and character? Traveling deeper into the psyche, we question how emotions, such as fear or compassion, may change the equation.

In contrast to these mainstream questions, proponents of contextual effects analysis offered an alternative that harkened back to the work of the Columbia school of voting behavior and the work of V.O. Key. Much of this work began as an investigation of the interaction between places (usually neighborhoods) and political behavior, and evoked Foladare’s (1968) study of neighborhood effects on voting behavior. Huckfeldt (1979, 1980), in particular, focused on urban neighborhoods as the starting place of social context. Huckfeldt’s studies combined aggregate and individual survey data to situate individual political participation within neighborhood social context. Huckfeldt’s findings indicated that neighborhood social context enhanced political participation, depending on social status. However, contextual effects scholarship was criticized for its reliance on aggregate ecological data to make individual inferences (Eulau & Rothenberg 1986). The use of aggregate data to capture individual relationships presented a problem because
the mechanism of context had to be assumed. It was assumed that behind all of the aggregate data was a myriad of social interactions at the neighborhood level that could be observed and used to infer contextual effects on political behavior. Eulau & Rothenberg, sympathetic to contextual analysis, responded to the methodological and theoretical problems by making a theoretical distinction between social context, as individual-based social interaction networks, and environment, which had the connotation of place. They constructed survey data that captured interpersonal social interaction. They found that neighborhoods as places had no impact on political behavior, but rather neighborhoods as defined by social networks—that is, as unconnected to actual places—influenced political behavior and vote choice. Context was defined, therefore, as “life space,” and the causal driving force of “life space” was social interaction within personal networks. In response to this, Huckfeldt, who has become the leading political science practitioner of contextual effects analysis, moved away from a geographical focus on neighborhood context and toward a social network model (Baybeck & Huckfeldt 2002, Huckfeldt 1992, Huckfeldt et al. 2005). Huckfeldt has developed a variety of sophisticated methods to study context as social interaction within personal networks. His findings provide strong evidence for the importance of social interaction, and the flow of information through social networks, as an influence on political behavior. However, by following Eulau & Rothenberg and focusing almost exclusively on social interaction as the causal mechanism of context, Huckfeldt has moved away from a concrete sense of space and place.

In summary, political scientists who are interested in context have settled around the idea that context is social interaction. Whether it is social interaction among friends and neighbors or social interaction within racially homogeneous or heterogeneous environments (Gay 2004, Oliver & Wong 2003), political scientists see social interaction as the driving force of context. In contrast, several political scientists and political geographers have shown that there is more to context than social interaction. Books & Prysby (1991) theorize four ways in which context, situated in place, can affect voting behavior: understanding of local issues, conditions, and events; political information that is channeled through geographical conduits; mobilization and voter education efforts of locally based campaign organizations; and, finally, social interaction with neighbors and within social networks. Burbank (1995) focuses on the psychological mechanism of context, finding evidence for individual perception of contextual environment as an important causal mechanism. Cho & Rudolph (2007) find evidence for spatial contagion affecting voting behavior and theorize that in addition to social interaction, the spatial context of political behavior may act as an unconscious or “low intensity” information shortcut or heuristic device. British political geographers Johnston & Pattie (2005) also find strong evidence for spatial context as an influence on Labour voters in Britain. The common element underlying all of these alternative models of context is a connection to space and place. By theoretically separating context from place, Huckfeldt’s concept of “social space” and Eulau & Rothenberg’s “life space” are unable to conceive of and capture these spatial or place-based contextual
effects. However, another approach to context has arisen within political geography: what Agnew (1996a) calls “context-as-place.” This concept encompasses all of the causal mechanisms of context and provides a theoretical foundation that balances the individual and the aggregate.

Context-as-Place

Space and place are not current concepts in political science, so it is important to review what they mean to political geographers. One of the insights of political geography is that physical space as a category of analysis has been neglected by Western social science. Space has been treated as a neutral plane of human existence, a container for important social, political, and natural processes. Political geographers challenge this notion, pointing out that physical space has to be produced, is often controlled by great powers, and can form the empowering bases of political resistance (Harvey 1989, 1990; Lefebvre 1991).

Terrestrial space is often understood in the social sciences as the plane on which events take place at particular locations. It is general as opposed to the particularity of place (Tuan 1974). Space is also understood as commanded or controlled, whereas place is lived or experienced (Harvey 1989, Harvey 1990). Space is the abstraction of places into a grid or coordinate system, as if the observer is ‘outside it’ or looking down at the world from above. (Agnew & Smith 2002, p. 4)

In contrast to abstract space, place is a category of particular and unique instances of human social and political experience, culture, and institutions. Places are situated within various spatial systems and are structured by forces and processes operating at various geographical scales. Because places are experienced and lived, they are essential components of political and social relations.

“Space” as an abstraction is quite familiar in political science, as in the widespread studies of “issue space.” These metaphoric usages of the term are highly useful tools of analysis, but they are also indicative of the nearly total lack of concern for geometric, territorial spaces and for places as locations of human action. We say “nearly” because there has been a hopeful sign of interaction between political geographers and political scientists about the best way to think about contextual effects in voting behavior.

This exchange took place in the pages of Political Geography, between political geographer John Agnew and political scientist Gary King (Agnew 1996a, Agnew 1996b, Flint 1996, King 1996). Political geographers, according to Agnew (2002, p. 12), focus “on trying to discover the ways in which geography...mediates between people, on the one hand, and political organization, on the other.” This research agenda leads to a concern for the context—geographical, social, and political—in which political behavior occurs. “There is a persisting tendency to insist that politics cannot be adequately understood without understanding the geographical contexts in which it takes place, from global geopolitics at one end
of the scale to local politics at the other” (Agnew 2002, p. 12). Political issues and government policy, Agnew argues, have geographically variable impacts, and political messages are often effectively targeted and shaped according to variations in political and human geography.

In summary, the hierarchical-geographical context or place channels the flow of interests, influence and identity out of which political activities emanate. This approach assumes, therefore, that political behavior is inevitably structured by a changing configuration of social-geographical influences as global-local connections shift over time. The configurations of causal influences all relate back to the historical geography of the world economy at any particular time. However, because of differences in prior experiences no place can be reduced to them. (Agnew 1996a, p. 133)

King, in his response to Agnew, challenges the usefulness of contextual research. “Political geographers should not be so concerned with demonstrating that context matters” (King 1996, p. 160). King argues that context rarely makes a huge difference...who you talk to, the types of people you live near, the nature of your community, your political geography, all have some effect on the vote and on political opinions, but all empirical evidence seems to indicate that the effect is relatively small. The geographical variation is usually quite large to begin with, but after we control for what we have learned about voters, there isn’t much left for contextual effects. So, in a narrow sense, geography matters, but contextual effects do not. (King 1996, p. 160)

Agnew replies that King is reducing the concept of context and the study of contextual effects to a simplified form of the “neighborhood effect” that has been studied periodically in the political science literature (Foladare 1968). Though much more sympathetic to the work of contextual effects scholars than King is, Agnew also criticizes research that neglects the integration of context and place. Agnew calls this form of contextual analysis “local contextualism” and criticizes it for being intellectually defensive. Practitioners of local contextualism, in Agnew’s view, treat the local context as separate from the global (or macro) context. Moreover, contextual effects are aberrational in that those affected by context are seen as deviations from the behavioral norm. Contextual effects, then, are seen as external effects acting on the neutral plane of space and place. Context is seen as another cause, another explanation of individual behavior. Context-as-place, on the other hand, understands context as integral to the formation of political identity and political behavior. Context-as-place cannot be separated so easily from political behavior.

The Agnew-King debate was limited by a fundamental disagreement on underlying premises. Agnew found King to be “dismissive of the geosociological element in [his] argument. King’s alternative is ontological (and methodological) individualism” (Agnew 1996b, p. 165). Agnew’s
point is precisely that we can never satisfactorily explain what drives individual choices and action unless we situate the individuals in the social-geographical contexts of their lives . . . . These include much more than the neighborhood effects King wants to reduce context to. Above all, they involve paying close attention to the geographical levels or scales that frame explanation. In other words, the causes of the political beliefs and actions of individuals are organized geosociologically. (Agnew 1996b, p. 165)

Contextual theory, as developed by Agnew, criticizes ontological individualism and offers as an alternative a theoretical foundation for examining and understanding politics in all its complexity. A place-context perspective provides different questions and answers. Instead of universal causes of political behavior (e.g., asocial rational self-interest), a place-context perspective emphasizes the geographical situatedness of voters, candidates, issues, and information.

As indicated above, there are several contextual political scientists whose work is consistent with Agnew’s context-as-place. Books & Prysby (1991) have attempted to move contextual theory beyond social interaction while still maintaining a connection to geographical place. Cho’s sophisticated spatial analysis supplements Huckfeldt’s research into social interaction as the causal mechanism of contextual effects with a causal mechanism that is much more closely tied to place (Cho 2003, Cho & Rudolph 2006). Oliver, along with several coauthors, has produced research into racial and ethnic context as well as suburban democracy and city size that is theoretically and methodologically cognizant of the importance of context-as-place (Oliver 2000, 2001; Oliver & Mendelberg 2000; Oliver & Wong 2003).

In fact, the authors of *The American Voter* also understood the importance of place and its connection to context. Campbell et al. may have been instrumental in moving political science toward an individual focus, but their work was sensitive to geographical variation in political culture. “The American political system . . . embraces a variety of political subcommunities. Each of these communities is a pervasive medium within which behavior must occur. And each leaves some characteristic impress on that behavior” (Campbell et al. 1960, p. 266). Moreover, the authors believed that “electoral behavior can be understood only through a comprehension of the context in which it occurs” (p. 289). The difference to be resolved is whether this kind geographical context is limited to the immediate proximity of the voter or political actor in question, as in King’s formulation, or whether, as in Agnew’s, the geographical context should range from the local to the global.

We call the tendency to limit geographical contextual effects to the local neighborhood “weak contextualism” because it does not consider the full implications of geographical spatiality. Consequently, much of the research into political context has moved away from a connection to geographical place and toward a concept of context based on social interaction and social networks. From this point of view, context is conceived entirely as based around individuals and the influence of their
friends and family in what Huckfeldt calls “social space,” which is not closely tied to context-as-place (Huckfeldt et al. 2005, p. 32).

Agnew’s strong contextualism posits a two-way, interactive bond between individual behavior and contextual setting. “This perspective combines commitments to the theoretical primacy of ‘the human agent’ (who does the behaving) with the analytic primacy of ‘the social-geographical’ (the setting for behaving). In this way the human agent and the social context can be integrated into analysis without getting into the abstract swamp of ‘the micromacro problem’” (Agnew 1996a, p. 131–32).

Although we are sympathetic to the challenge put forth by the “social logic” scholars, we believe that a theory of context based on social interaction in networks is forced to be defensive with respect to the mainstream of voting behavior research that has descended from *The American Voter*. Instead, we suggest that returning to the understanding of place in *The American Voter* can provide a useful starting point and that it may offer a corrective to the lack of concern for context and place in, for instance, *The New American Voter* (Miller & Shanks 1996). Political scientists can benefit by incorporating the geographers’ understanding of place, which can provide theoretical and analytical depth to their research. A place-based definition of context, drawn from Agnew’s theory, provides rigorous theoretical foundations for the increasing amount of contextual research in political science. Contexts abound, but all have something in common: the places in which they are connected. Context-as-place can connect studies that focus on the contextual environment of racial attitudes, economic context, and partisan context to each other and to the institutional context in which these phenomena are studied.

**THE SPATIALITY OF GOVERNANCE: RECONSIDERING GEOGRAPHY IN THE OLD AND NEW INSTITUTIONALISMS**

In the preceding section, we argued for a “strong contextualism” as a conceptual framework for studying mass political behavior, one that draws on political geography and insists that “context” includes the geographical place of mass political agency, at every scale. Wider-scale contexts (national, global) are tied to mass participants by networks of media production and circulation, each of which has a specific geography. In this section, we shift our attention from the “base” of the state to its apex: the exercise of power in governance by executives, legislatures, courts, bureaucrats, parties, and other instantiations of the state. There has been a resurgence of interest in “politics in time” (Pierson 2004) among political scientists, but an interest in “politics in space” has been impeded by a tortured memory of geography in the founding of political science—a kind of political geography that we have, in part, happily left behind, but also one that we have largely misunderstood. The founders of the discipline of political science were explicitly geographical thinkers, but founders are rapidly rejected, and a sometimes-valuable theory and method have been needlessly shed.
Here we briefly reconsider the “old institutionalism,” mining it for several very useful theoretical and methodological insights, beginning with the insight that all institutions leave footprints in space and time. Next, we give a brief account of the “new institutionalism’s” profound contributions to the inherent temporality of governance. We then argue that the new institutionalism has largely fallen victim to nonspatial thinking, treating the territories of governance as an abstract, homogeneous container in the vast majority of cases. The lack of concern for electoral analysis in the new institutionalism probably reflects its antipathy to socially driven explanations of governance, but political participation is highly institutional. Much new institutionalism has been pointing in a geographical direction all along, we shall argue, and so it will not be difficult to spatialize the paradigm by extension of its core principles and by drawing on the ready-made frameworks developed in parallel (but without communication) by the field of political geography, as reviewed at the beginning of this essay.

Spatial thinking in American political science was de rigueur during the first generation of university-based political science in the 1880s–1920s. American political science began, as did nearly all Ph.D.-granting social science disciplines in the United States, at the Johns Hopkins University (JHU) Seminary of History and Politics. The dominant paradigm for such students as Woodrow Wilson, John R. Commons, and Fredrick Jackson Turner was the old institutionalism. Herbert Baxter Adams, the obvious founder of this “school,” is actually credited with coining the very term political science. His “seminary” (the first in the United States, following the German model) was also led by the institutionalist economist Richard T. Ely. Adams was notorious for his “germ theory” of American political development, which proposed a study of the origins of democracy in such institutional “germs” as the “folk-moot” and the New England town council, traced to its earliest appearances in the archives of medieval Germanic records (Ethington & McDonagh 1994). The entire JHU paradigm was nothing if not geographical. Many of Adams’s own publications are almost obsessed with places—“The Germanic Origin of the New England Towns”; “Saxon Tithing-Men in America”; “Village Communities of Cape Ann and Salem”; and “Norman Constables in America” (Adams 1883). Adams’s most powerful student, Woodrow Wilson, literally wrote the book on historical institutionalism: his influential *The State. Elements of Historical and Practical Politics. A Sketch of Institutional History and Administration* (Wilson 1889).

Wilson’s contemporary Frederick Jackson Turner wrote the geo-historical counterpart in his spectacularly successful “Turner Thesis” of 1893, which postulated a functional relationship between North American democratic political culture and the process of settling the frontier. Turner, insisting that he was rejecting Adams’ “germ theory,” rejected only his mentor’s insistence that North American political institutions were imported from Europe; he wanted a theory that was specific to the American nation, unique to his native soil. He was, thus, an architect of American political ideology and a major figure in the nationalist movement of Theodore Roosevelt’s generation. His thesis is not admirable in itself,
disregarding the powerful transnational influences and the racial colonizing project of his frontier “democrats.” Technically, however, Turner’s approach points the way toward a very promising explanatory theory: geographical institutionalism.

We can turn Turner on his head and show how his geo-historical institutionalism is even more effective in refutation of his thesis that democracy became refreshed and renewed on the frontier. We could argue that Euro-Americans’ unjust Constitution and laws, their violent militarism, and their unstoppable military arose from their territorial conquest experience, which included enslaving Africans and expropriating the indigenous peoples of North America. A cruel, segregationist political culture emerged full-blown during the Wilson administration and has taken several generations to dismantle. The invention of the institutions of political terrorism (e.g., the Ku Klux Klan), Jim Crow segregation, and wholesale disenfranchisement all had their roots in local cultures and places.

The Civil War was nothing if not a territorial contest, caused by territorial expansion (Foner 1995, McPherson 1982, Potter 1976). The internationalist, nationalistic state bracketed by the two Roosevelt presidents is unthinkable without the global reach of American corporations. It is also beyond dispute that the U.S.-Spanish-Cuban War, the U.S intervention in the Great War, and the Pacific War were all caused, in no small part, by U.S. international trading concerns (Iriye 1987, Link 1957, Perez 1998). If the vast bulk of U.S. governing institutions that have been founded in the twentieth century are inseparable from these international developments, then the institutions must have a geographical nature: regional, continental, and global footprints that define the character, operation, and resources of those institutions. So although Turner’s thesis on the frontier and its sequel, The Significance of Sections in American History (Turner 1932), have gone out of fashion, Adams and Turner were actually right about the historical spatiality of political institutions. Likewise, Wilson was right that the state is composed of “historical and practical” institutions. That each state requires a geographical footprint was axiomatic to the man who presided over the Versailles Treaty of 1919, which inscribed the Washington-Versailles system of international relations into the war-torn twentieth-century global landscape.

The New Institutionalism

After the Second World War proved that Wilson’s formalistic sense of the state and his legalistic framing of institutionalism were unsustainable in the face of real-world nations whose practice of governance diverged from the frameworks of their constitutions, political scientists entered their “behavioral revolution,” focusing on individuals in aggregates rather than on governments in the abstract. Pulled by their own inclinations to escape ideology, and pushed by McCarthyism, mainstream American social scientists became profoundly individualistic in theory and method. But the escape into scientism, as is well known, did not survive the 1960s. Like political geography, the new institutionalism traces its origins mainly to the aftermath of the upheavals of the 1960s. The new institutionalism became

The term new institutionalism actually applies to as many as seven different schools that revived an institutional framework after the behavioral era (Peters 2005). The most prominent of these are listed below:

1. “Normative institutionalism” emphasizes the ways that institutional norms shape their members’ behavior (March & Olsen 1984).

2. “Rational choice institutionalism” is really a revision of rational choice theory that situates individuals within institutions that impose “rules and incentives” and thus provide “equilibrium” in a given political system (Weingast 2002).

3. “Historical institutionalism” holds that policies and governance more generally are “path dependent” on “initial policy choices, and the institutionalized commitments that grow out of them” in time (Peters 2005, p. 20; Pierson 2004, Pierson & Skocpol 2002).

The term historical institutionalism was coined by Skocpol and influentially outlined by Steinmo et al. (1992). This “politics in time” perspective is a profoundly historical form of political science, harking back even to Edmund Burke’s and Alexis de Tocqueville’s paradigms, which posit governance as structured by durable groups and traditions. In this tradition, “institution” is most clearly defined as a “regularized or crystallized principle of conduct, action or behavior that governs a crucial area of social life and that endures over time” (Gould 1987, p. 290). Institutions, as both the old and the new institutionalism have abundantly shown, are the living structures of human society (Ethington & McDonagh 1995).

The first great landmark in the genre of historical institutionalism is arguably *States and Social Revolutions* (1979), in which Skocpol contested Moore’s “social origins” explanation of totalitarianism with a state-centered one. Skocpol showed that the differences could be accounted for by different institutional structures of governance in Russia and China. In American political science, Skowronek’s *Building a New American State* (1982) showed that state-building began with difficult materials at the end of the nineteenth century. Discarding Wilson’s preoccupation with the formal structure of governance in the U.S. Constitution, Skowronek characterized the governance actually practiced as a “state of courts and parties.” That “state” could be modified to achieve the greater “capacity” required of an emerging global industrial giant only with great awkwardness, and the national state that ultimately emerged by the 1930s was a patchwork of path-dependent components. Skocpol, Skowronek, Steinmo et al., and this larger school have shown beyond doubt that governance of contemporary western nation-states, despite their attempts at practicing liberal ideals of democracy and universal justice, has been irreducibly particular, shackled to Byzantine historical roots called path dependencies.
The new institutionalists have carried these insights into a wide range of studies, mostly in the realm of policy formation. They have been particularly effective in showing how the origins, functions, and legitimacy of social regulation and provision in “welfare states” must be studied in historical context, because those kinds of policies are usually patchworks of institutions that retain, in their logic and boundaries, the imprint of the configuration of interests that marked their origins (Finegold & Skocpol 1995, Lieberman 1998). “At any given moment,” write Orren & Skowronek (2004, p. 11), “the different rules, arrangements, and timetables put in place by changes negotiated at various points in the past will be found to impose themselves on the actors of the present and to affect their efforts to negotiate changes of their own.” These principles lead to the very important analytical concepts of “multiple orders” of governing institutions (each with their own life history and logic) and the “intercurrence” of multiple orders in any field of political conflict (Orren & Skowronek 1996).

Spatializing Paths in the New Institutionalism

It is remarkable how close the historical institutionalists have come to a geographical framework, without realizing it. “Path dependency” is what Lakoff & Johnson (1980) call a “grounded metaphor.” Although Pierson (2004) uses geographical terminology metaphorically throughout Politics in Time, path dependency is a compelling metaphor precisely because there is a path that can be traced in geographical space. All human actions must take place on specific sites. Indeed, it is remarkable how much Orren & Skowronek use spatial metaphors, apparently unaware of the groundedness of these metaphors in geographical space. “Political change ultimately registers its developmental significance in altered forms of governance,” they state. “This assertion follows directly from the historical view of change provided by a description of authority relations as they are arranged on a site, demanding simply that significant political change manifest itself in a new array or new arrangement of authorities on the scene” (Orren & Skowronek 2004, pp. 24–25). We suggest that “arranged on a site” indicates a specific place. The implications of spatial terms and concepts such as “site” should be more broadly explored.

A core premise of historical institutionalism has been the thesis of the relative autonomy of the state (Evans et al. 1985). Reconsidering that concept in spatial terms greatly expands its descriptive, and perhaps explanatory, power. Autonomy from the social base is a function of duration, and duration is, philosophically speaking, a statement about fixity in space. The state or any of its governing and participatory institutions endures in a territory relative to the changes in other social forms in that same territory. Another cornerstone of the new institutionalism is a critique of socially driven models of political policy, power, and change. Studies have shown time and again that voters, interest groups, and the masses can be mobilized only within pre-existing structures of access to the state. Studies of electoral realignments and of the social sources of voting behavior, epitomized by The American Voter and The New American Voter (Miller & Shanks 1996), stop short of governance and policy formation, leaving open the crucial question of why
or how mass participation actually matters in the end. Yet it is striking that so little of the scholarship published in the subfield of American political development includes direct analyses of voting behavior (but see Ethington 1993, 1994; Harvey 1998). We point to the great potential of spatializing studies of governance and participation. A spatial framework can be extended so that it forms a bridge between institutionalist electoral analysis and studies of political behavior.

Now we are in a position to see that the concepts and frameworks produced in the field of political geography (and human geography more generally) can bring our previous discussion of context-as-place into the mainstream not only of electoral behavior analysis but also of historical institutionalism. If contexts are places, as we showed above, and if contexts are also institutions, as the new institutionalism shows, and, finally, if institutions have footprints, as we have argued here, then both mass political participation and governance can and should be mapped into specific territorial geographies.

Political science generally strives toward analysis in abstract, uniform spaces, but the human geographers emphasize the concurrence of place and space in political geography (Agnew & Smith 2002). In Markusen’s (1996) memorable phrase, places are “sticky,” holding institutions in specific locations, whereas spaces are “slippery.” We need to adapt this dyad to mass participatory behavior and governing institutions as well. Parties, neighborhood contexts, and bureaucratic sites are sticky institutional places that structure political agency and the exercise of political power. Exposing the variegated, intercurrent chronologies and life cycles of governing institutions, the new institutionalists have given us a broad range of new tools, but they have also avoided direct consideration of the spatiality of institutions that endure at specific sites for varied periods of time. Spatializing the tools and concepts of institutionalism and political behavior may allow us to build a bridge between the two disciplines of political science and political geography.

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