

# Official Actors in the Policy Process

## Theoretical Approaches & Overview

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### POSC 315: Introduction to Public Policy

#### Lecture 4.1

# Lecture Series Overview

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## **Part 1 (Today):**

Theoretical frameworks, key concepts, overview of actor types, and a focus on legislators.

## **Part 2 (Next):**

Executive branch, bureaucracy, judiciary, and their interactions.

# Why study policy actors?

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## **Who makes policy decisions and why?**

Understanding the motivations, constraints, and behaviors of policy actors helps us predict and explain policy outcomes.

# Three theoretical approaches

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How do we study policy actors?

Three big frameworks to know:

- **Institutionalism**
- **Behavioralism**
- **Neo-institutionalism**

# Institutionalism

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## Key characteristics

- Studies politics through formal institutional interactions
- Focuses on official rules and procedures
- Emphasizes relationships between institutions
- Concerned with constitutional and legal frameworks

# Institutionalism (continued)

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## Historical context

- Dominant approach until mid-20th century
- Primarily descriptive
- Focused on design, formal powers, official processes

**Example:** Analyzing how separation of powers shapes policy development by looking at constitutional provisions and institutional rules.

# Behavioralism

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## Key characteristics

- Focuses on individual political motivation and behavior
- Analyzes incentives and disincentives
- Examines relationships between individuals and groups
- Empirical observation and data

# Behavioralism (continued)

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## Methodological shift

- Emerged mid-20th century
- Scientific, statistical analysis of political behavior
- Focused on what actors actually do—not just their roles

**Example:** How reelection concerns shape legislators' votes and positions, beyond their formal job description.



# Neo-institutionalism

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## Key characteristics

- Synthesizes institutional and behavioral approaches
- Looks at how institutions shape behavior and vice versa
- Applies rational choice theory and sociological insights

# Neo-institutionalism (continued)

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## Variants

- Historical institutionalism
- Rational choice institutionalism
- Sociological institutionalism
- Discursive institutionalism

**Example:** Congressional committee structures create incentives for some behaviors while constraining others, shaping both action and outcomes.

# Comparing the approaches

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## Institutionalism

- Focus: Formal rules
- Unit: Institutions
- Key Question: How do structures shape policy?

## Behavioralism

- Focus: Individual acts
- Unit: People
- Key Question: Why do actors behave as they do?

## Neo-institutionalism

- Focus: Interaction
- Unit: Both
- Key Question: How do structures and behaviors interact?

Each approach is useful—but none tells the whole story by itself.

# Key institutional concepts

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- **Institutional inertia:** Institutions resist change (like Newton's First Law).
- **Path dependency:** Past decisions shape today's options—creates "lock-in."
- **Punctuated equilibrium:** Long stretches of stability, then sudden change.

These concepts help explain why change is hard, but possible.

# Types of policy actors

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**Official actors:** Formally recognized participants in the policy process, with legal or constitutional authority.

- **Legislative:** Legislators
- **Executive:** President, governors
- **Administrative:** Bureaucrats
- **Judicial:** Judges



# What makes official actors “official”?

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- Formal authority granted by constitution or law
- Recognized role in the policy process
- Subject to checks and balances
- Accountable to the public (directly or indirectly)

# Why start with legislators?

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In democratic systems, legislators are the main lawmaking body—constitutionally empowered to create policy.

# Legislative functions

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- Lawmaking authority
- Budget and appropriations
- Oversight of executive branch
- Representation of constituents

### **Institutional features:**

- Committee structures
- Parliamentary procedures
- Party leadership systems
- Bicameral negotiations

# What drives legislators?

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## The “electoral connection”

- **Re-election**: Staying in office
- **Policy**: Achieving preferred outcomes
- **Power**: Gaining influence

### **Behavioral implications:**

- Constituent service
- Position-taking on visible issues
- Credit-claiming for benefits
- Coalition-building

# Legislative constraints

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## Institutional:

- Committee jurisdictions
- Parliamentary rules
- Leadership agenda control
- Bicameral approval needs

### Political:

- Party discipline
- Interest group pressure
- Media attention
- Electoral consequences

Neo-institutionalism explains how formal constraints and behavioral incentives interact.



# What do legislators actually do?

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- **Lawmaking:** Drafting bills, research, coalition-building, voting
- **Oversight:** Hearings, investigations, budget review, program evaluation
- **Representation:** Constituent services, outreach, meetings, media

# How theory helps us understand legislators

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## **Institutionalism:**

Committees, voting rules, procedures

**Behavioralism:**

Re-election concerns, personal goals

**Neo-institutionalism:**

Rules + incentives, strategic behavior

The best analysis combines all three.

# Case study: Tax reform legislation

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**Institutional factors:** - Revenue bills start in the House - Committee jurisdictions overlap - Budget reconciliation and conference committees

**Behavioral factors:**

- Constituency preferences
- Donor influence
- Ambition, ideology

**Neo-institutional insight:**

Rules create opportunities, but electoral incentives shape which get used.

# Key takeaways

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- Three theoretical lenses, each revealing part of the legislative story
- Institutional concepts explain policy stability and change
- Legislators act at the intersection of rules and incentives
- Understanding policy requires both structure and behavior

# Discussion questions

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1. Which theoretical approach best explains legislative behavior—why?
2. How do institutional constraints and behavioral incentives interact?
3. Can you spot examples of inertia or path dependency in today's policy debates?
4. How might different legislative structures affect policy?

