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Viewpoint

Remaking political institutions in sustainability transitions

James J. Patterson *

Copernicus Institute of Sustainable Development, Faculty of Geosciences, Utrecht University, the Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

A key challenge for sustainability transitions scholarship in the coming decade is to understand how existing political institutions (e.g. policies, laws, regulations, constitutions) can be *remade* to support transitions. This requires not only explaining past changes, but also ‘thinking forward’ about the types of struggles likely to occur when institutional changes are deliberately pursued. Several areas of struggle come into view: the politics of novelty, uptake, dismantling, stability, and interplay across regimes. This leads to a view of institutional transformation as an unfolding trajectory ‘in-the-making’, characterized by emergent path creation. Moreover, it enables new bridges from transitions thinking to broader political and policy sciences which also increasingly puzzle over how major societal change may be realized in contemporary society.

A key challenge for transitions scholars in the coming decade is to study political institutional change within and for societal transitions. Under this view, institutions refer to “clusters of rights, rules and decision-making procedures that give rise to social practices, assign roles to the participants in these practices, and guide interactions among occupants of these roles” (Young et al., 2008, p.xxii). For example, this could include specific policies/programs, policy-making procedures, laws and regulations, and even constitutions. Understanding how such structural arrangements can change – especially prospectively – is a major challenge in understanding how societal transitions might or might not unfold.

Sustainability transitions scholarship affords a key role for institutions. For example, the notion of regime as the dominant set of institutions and practices is foundational. Some scholars have further unpacked institutional dynamics, emphasizing norms and beliefs that emerge from, and in turn shape, behavior and practices. This includes formative work on the institutionalization and deinstitutionalization of institutional logics (Fünfschilling, 2014), and institutional work (Brown et al., 2013; Fuenfschilling and Truffer, 2016). Such approaches reflect a sociological institutionalism where institutions are seen to mediate cognition, meaning, and social practice (sensu. Hall and Taylor, 1996), and where institutional change is seen to emerge from the institutionalization of new practices. Others have begun to study political institutions conditioning societal transitions (Andrews-Speed, 2016; Kuzemko et al., 2016; Lockwood et al., 2017; Roberts et al., 2018). This reflects a historical institutionalism where institutions are seen as distributional instruments that mediate conflict over resources and access to power (sensu. Hall and Taylor, 1996; Mahoney and Thelen, 2010). This latter approach can enrich transitions debates on conditions and processes of regime structural change, where political institutions are treated as a dependent variable within broader societal transitions. But we should also go a step further to utilize existing insights about political institutional change to ‘think forward’ about future dynamics that can be anticipated and steered.

Interrogating how political institutions are ‘remade’ within complex existing settings provides a point of departure for studying institutional change looking forward (Patterson, 2021). While calls for radical institutional change are common, the challenge of course lies in understanding how this can actually occur. Institutional change rarely occurs on a blank slate and typically requires a

* Corresponding author at: Utrecht University, Utrecht, the Netherlands.

E-mail address: j.j.patterson@uu.nl.

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great deal of effort by actors confronting complex clusters of existing arrangements. Interventions taken will typically encounter (and provoke) resistance, not only directly from incumbents but also more indirectly through friction with existing setups. Realizing deliberate change in political institutions is difficult due to path dependency, inefficient adaptation to external pressures, and heterogeneous opportunity structures. A focus on ‘remaking’ institutions centers on struggles over deliberate institutional change and their consequences for unfolding trajectories of institutional development. This is salient to emerging foci in transitions studies that suggest attention to political institutional change, such as deliberate decline (Loorbach et al., 2017; Rosenbloom et al., 2020), transition pathway navigation (Rosenbloom, 2017; Stripple and Bulkeley, 2019), and assembling of policy mixes (Kivimaa and Kern, 2016; Rogge and Reichardt, 2016).

Multiple areas of struggle can be expected when seeking to deliberately remake political institutions. First, the introduction of *novelty* (i.e. creating new institutions) requires gaining space for new arrangements (Mahoney and Thelen, 2010; Sheingate, 2014), and may also involve generative friction between contradicting institutional regimes (Orren and Skowronek, 1996). Second, gaining *uptake* (i.e. expansion/scaling-up of new institutions) requires actively diffusing and gaining acceptance for new institutions, and may also involve self-reinforcing feedbacks through payoffs for early movers (Jacobs and Weaver, 2015; Roberts et al., 2018) or catalytic effects within a regime (Bernstein and Hoffmann, 2018). Third, *dismantling* existing institutions (e.g. removing or destabilizing) involve struggles between coalitions seeking to gain new benefits and those at risk of losing them (Jordan et al., 2013), and may also involve self-undermining feedback through unanticipated losses for particular groups (Jacobs and Weaver, 2015) or lack of attention to sustaining support (Patashnik, 2014). Fourth, overcoming *stability* (i.e. maintenance of existing institutions) requires dealing with resistance from incumbents (e.g. Brisbois, 2019; Geels, 2014), as well as lock-in relations between institutions, technologies, and practices (Seto et al., 2016), and even everyday administration autonomously maintaining existing institutions (Patterson and Beunen, 2019). Fifth, addressing *interplay* between regimes (i.e. institutional interactions across domains) requires attention to synergistic or conflictual relations with cognate regimes (Oberthür and Gehring, 2006), as well as alignment with the wider ideational environment (Lieberman, 2002).

All these areas of struggle are relevant to thinking prospectively about the process of political institutional change in transitions (Fig. 1). This provides a useful frame to bring together different strands of analysis which may otherwise remain separate yet speak to a broader shared interest in understanding how institutions are remade. For example, Lockwood (2016) analyses the politics of niche creation (i.e. *novelty*) in the regulatory regime for electricity grids under pressure due to expanding electrification in the UK, showing how the creation of protective space for technological innovation was itself a gradual endogenous process of introducing new regulatory elements. Spijkerboer et al. (2021) study marine spatial planning for offshore wind energy, highlighting the salience of cross-domain interactions (i.e. *interplay*) and finding complex interactions between efforts to create new institutions (i.e. *novelty*) and maintain existing institutions (*stability*) leading to incremental development in institutional frameworks. More broadly, if we consider goals for ambitious climate action under proposed green new deals (e.g. Boyle et al., 2021), it is clear that this will require political institutions in many sectors and arenas to be radically remade.

The overall argument of this Viewpoint is that prospective political institutional change needs to be foregrounded in transitions thinking. A focus on examining how institutions are remade provides a useful starting point, as it draws attention to multiple areas of struggle that we should expect to see. This implies a view of institutional transformation as an unfolding trajectory ‘in-the-making’, where outcomes in each moment are often provisional and indeterminate, and pathways of structural change are *created* rather than followed. Moreover, it enables fragmented insights on institutional change from other fields (especially political and policy sciences) to be brought to bear, while simultaneously offering new bridges for transitions studies to contribute back to these other fields which increasingly also puzzle over how major societal change may be realized in contemporary society.

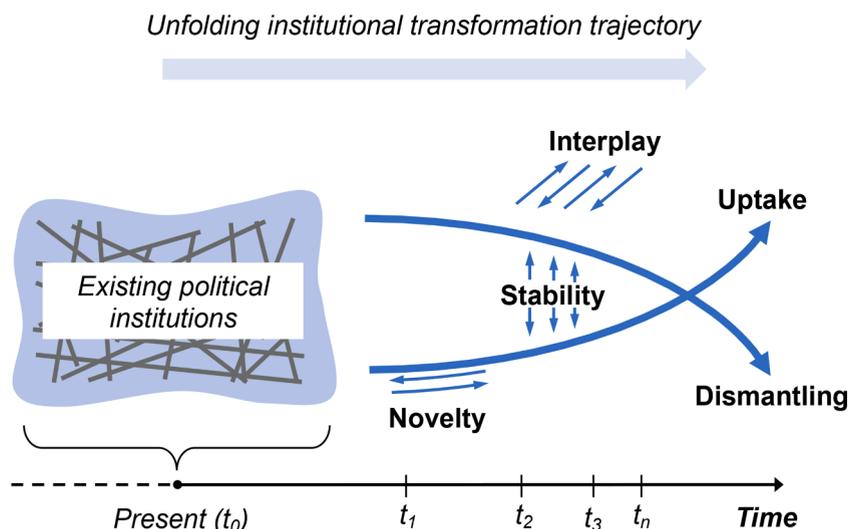


Fig. 1. Core areas of struggle within efforts to remake political institutions under a prospective analytical frame.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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