What do the following have in common?

• Congress (#16)
• Television news (#15)
• Big business (#14)
• Criminal Justice System (#13)
• Newspapers (#12)

According to Brenan (2021), the American public has the least amount of confidence (a “great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence) in these five institutions out of 16 listed. None of them inspire confidence in more than 21% of respondents. In addition, all of these lost the confidence of an additional 1 to 4% of respondents between 2020 and 2021. (See Table 1.) Other institutions, such as public schools, the US Supreme Court, and the Presidency, also lost ground.

Does any of this matter? According to the Institutional Approach (IA), the answer is, emphatically, “Yes!”.

The institutional approach (or institutionalism) to understanding policy development is especially important in the fields of political science, economics, and sociology (Peters, 2000), although it is not very often used in social work policy research. This gap also points to a unique opening for social work scholars to expand theory-based social policy research by understanding and using this approach.

What is the Institutional Approach to Policy?

One of the factors that keep institutionalism a minor presence in social work research is that institutional theory actually has many branches. The approach and the differences are important but not necessarily within the current knowledge base of social work faculty and graduate students. Over two decades ago, Peters (2000)
described seven major institutional approaches, but he focused on just four: the normative approach, the rational choice version of institutionalism, historical institutionalism, and empirical institutionalism.

In the normative approach, the decisions of individuals involved in policymaking are guided by the rules and processes of the institutions involved in the decisions rather than their personal end goals being maximized. In this case, the individuals making the choices are more loyal to the institution and its rules than to the outcomes that would be expected in a rational choice approach—for example, a person involved in reporting accurate vote counts believing in voting integrity through following rules rather than bowing to political pressure to support his party’s candidate. Normative institutionalism sees that people learn about and adhere to the rules and processes by being in the institution.

Rational choice institutionalism may look like the normative version, but the individuals in decision-making roles bring their own values to the institution, choosing to affiliate only with institutions that they already agree with. A person with a strong political party affiliation may support that party regardless of conflicting ideas. If the “rule” of the institution is to support its candidate, no matter what, then vote totals may be changed to ensure victory.

Historical institutionalism places great weight on the power of precedent within an institution. Ideas, rules, and processes are “baked-into” the organization and make change difficult. This overlaps with the normative approach but asserts that early-days decisions continue to affect policy decisions many years later. To understand policy decisions in a value-based institution, one must know its beginnings. In

| Institution                        | 2021 | Change 2021 vs. 2020 |
|------------------------------------|------|----------------------|
| Congress                           | 12   | -1                   |
| Television news                    | 16   | -2                   |
| Big business                       | 18   | -1                   |
| Criminal Justice System            | 20   | -4                   |
| Newspapers                         | 21   | -3                   |
| Organized labor                    | 28   | -3                   |
| Technology companies               | 29   | -3                   |
| Public schools                     | 32   | -9                   |
| Banks                              | 33   | -5                   |
| US Supreme Court                   | 36   | -4                   |
| Church or organized religion       | 37   | -5                   |
| The Presidency                     | 38   | -1                   |
| Medical system                     | 44   | -7                   |
| Police                             | 51   | 3                    |
| Military                           | 69   | -3                   |
| Small business                     | 70   | -5                   |

Brenan, 2021
a sense, this could be called a version of the “deep state idea” that long-term members/employees of an institution will seek to hang on to the values of their early days against all attempts to force change.

The final type of institutionalism for Peters (2000) is labeled empirical. Although there are subtypes, all indicate that researchers must look at the role of institutions as they interact as well as the individuals. Civic groups, for example, are institutions that mediate between the public and government. Their impact needs to be looked at as well as governmental institutions.

One reason institutionalism is important is because it highlights that structures endure while individuals come and go. Institutions change the behavior of individuals who work within them (more so than individuals change the institutions). Because of this, policy decisions are more stable than they might otherwise be, and reform is more difficult than anticipated.

In the past decade or so, neo-institutionalism has been developed. In this revised approach, institutions still are organizations that create and enforce laws. Historically, policy scholars studied the institutions of any governmental system to classify and describe what existed. These could be compared as to the relative strength of the legislative, executive, and judicial branches within and across countries. In more recent years, a branch of policy studies has developed so-called new institutionalism or neo-institutionalism, which examines how institutions’ rules for decision-making shape the outcomes of the policy process (Smith & Larimer, 2017). Every institution develops arrangements (rules), which are defined by Crawford and Ostrom (1995) as “enduring regularities of human action in situations structured by rules, norms, and shared strategies, as well as by the physical world” (p. 582). When institutional arrangements are set up to make decisions in one way (compared to another), decision-makers respond with different decisions. In the USA, the Senate has different processes that apply in the House of Representatives, with different incentives for the elected officials serving in them. Thus, the two legislative bodies (representing the exact same voters) often pass very different legislations. Usually it is not any one rule that makes the difference in outputs, but sets of rules and procedures that create the differences.

Different types of rules exist. Some, called entry and exit rules, determine who may participate and what happens after actors exit. Position rules provide structure while authority rules state what actions participants “must, may, or may not” take. Other types of rules exist as well and help determine the scope, level of control, information levels, and payoffs for particular actions (Schlager & Cox, 2018, pp. 226–227).

One of the legacies of the 2020 Presidential elections in the USA is a much broader understanding of the importance of strong institutions and evenly applied rules in the running of elections. Voting, as a process, is vital to a democracy’s effectiveness—as is the belief that all voters will have their votes counted. As we know, even the rules of who is eligible to vote are crucial.

The US Constitution delegates holding elections to the states (Article 1, Sect. 4), which is why the institutions and rules on voting differ markedly between states. The Federal government eventually adopted amendments to the Constitution to provide more regulation to standardize processes, including expanding citizens eligible to vote
to include people other than white, property-owning males over the age of 21 and to ensure a “one-person, one-vote” standard for elections.

In the past 75 years, the trend for voting was to expand eligibility and ensure fewer people were denied their right to vote. The Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts of the mid-1960s outlawed discriminatory voting practices and provided enforcement for the 15th Amendment.

Ideas for Social Work Research Use of Neo-Institutionalism

Because this approach is not in the literature to any great extent, readers (especially graduate students) may not feel able to apply it without assistance. While the references to this article are helpful, social work policy research can look forward to having large number of case studies available in the near future.

Certainly, one practical application of the model is that if you do not like the policies being passed or the outcomes of those policies, you should seek to change the rules of the process. For example, each national political party and the parties in each state set up rules for participating in their primaries or caucuses (depending on the state). Understanding these rules thoroughly allow campaigns to win in that state even if the rules are very different in the adjoining state. After every presidential nomination fight, the losers fight to change the rules so that the next time, a different type of candidate will be chosen. In Wisconsin, Michigan, and North Carolina, after losing elections at the state level in 2016 and 2018, Republicans sought to change the rules in such a way that the victorious Democrats would be disadvantaged in changing policies that Republicans had passed (Smith & Davey, 2018).

One topic area that is vital is the use of voting eligibility rules. Republicans in many states have narrowed state laws regarding voter identification rules in order to prevent claimed “fraud” and “abuse.” In some states, legislatures can now invalidate the vote counts of lower level government (counties and cities) by a simple vote.

Other laws have been passed at the state level to institutionalize “parental rights” to control local school curricula, especially around the teaching of topics related to “Critical Race Theory,” despite little evidence of its use in elementary and secondary education.

The shift in laws to allow citizens to “enforce” anti-trans health care and reproductive rights health care paints a future where policy change is unpredictable—social workers need to be ready to understand how institutional rules are being altered to allow such outcomes. Our understanding of neo-institutionalism needs to expand and bear fruit in published studies. We also need to understand the need to support institutions and the people who run them professionally. Without them, policy becomes even more likely to be subverted by partisanship.
Articles in this Issue

As usual, the articles in this issue show a broad range of methods and topics. As the *Journal of Policy Practice and Research* continues, we see a wider variety of theory-based manuscripts and more papers that tackle topics outside of North American concerns—these are positive trends that need to continue. The social policy research community is growing, and I hope to showcase the diversity of ideas we see blooming.

Leah Hamilton, Meric Yorgun, and Allison Wright provide an interesting look at how universal basic income (UBI) is viewed by Americans in "'People Nowadays Will Take Everything They Can Get': American Perceptions of Basic Income Usage." While one might expect that middle- and higher-income people would be against universal basic income plans, one might also believe that those on the low end of the income distribution would be in favor of UBI. Results show, however, that current and former recipients of traditional assistance believe that they themselves would use the UBI to create future financial stability. They also felt, however, that others would be irresponsible. Recommendations for how to create increased support for UBI are also included.

Julie Birkenmaier and Alana Janssen give us "A Policy Mapping Analysis of Goals Related to Bank Accounts in Federal Legislative Proposals." Banking in the USA, unlike many other countries, is almost exclusively a for-profit enterprise, which leaves many lower income people fully unbanked or underbanked. This has negative impacts on people not often recognized by social work education. The authors explore what policy proposals were introduced in Congress during the first two decades of the 2000s. The two most common types of proposals were to expand access to bank accounts, to increase consumer protections, and to reduce costs of basic accounts. By understanding better what has been proposed (not necessarily passed or implemented), we can all see another aspect of how systems trap people in poverty.

The upheaval of society caused by the COVID-19 epidemic has led to rethinking of social work practice as well. Lisa Vogel and Vee Yeo wrote "'It’s Not a Cookie-Cutter Scenario Anymore': The COVID-19 Pandemic and Transitioning to Virtual Work" to help make sense of the transition and impacts, which continue to reverberate. Beyond a rich description of how five Wisconsin counties adapted, lessons are drawn to assist in implementing creative strategies and approaches to providing services. Areas of weakness in the new and rapidly evolving work processes include IT-related security and having little in the way of contingency planning to fall back on.

Instructors often lament that a good proportion of social work students come to their policy courses less than enthusiastically. Lisa Street, P. H. Martin, A. Renee White, and Amy Stevens coauthored "Problem-Based Learning in Social Policy Class: A Semester-Long Project Within Organizational Policy Practice" that describes the experiential learning approach they used to overcome reluctance by undergraduate social work students. Anticipated benefits, student outcomes, and difficulties with problem-based learning are explored, all with the aim of assisting
readers to plan, implement, and evaluate the use of this pedagogical approach for themselves and their students.

It is important to recognize and thank all the reviewers and back-office people for their work—getting reviews for most journals has become more difficult, but the JPPR reviewers have continued their selfless service to the journal and the profession. Without them, there would be a much less rigorous and interesting publication. The authors, of course, who entrust their work to us are our life blood. Thank you to them, as well.

Rick Hoefer, Ph.D.
Editor

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