



## Explaining decision-making in government: the neo-Durkheimian institutional framework

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# Explaining decision-making in government: the neo-Durkheimian institutional framework

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## *Keywords*

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## Abstract

In understanding styles of political judgement in government decision-making, explanatory limitations of rational choice, prospect theoretic, historical institutional, groupthink and other approaches suggest that there is space for developing other frameworks. This article argues that the neo-Durkheimian institutional theoretical framework deserves serious consideration. It shows that it offers a powerful causally explanatory framework for generating theories of decision-making in government which can be examined using historical comparative research designs. The value of the concept of a 'thought style' for understanding political judgement is demonstrated, and contrasted sharply with ideology. The theory argues that informal institutions explain thought styles. Well-known cases from the Cuban missile crisis, the Wilson and Heath governments illustrate the argument. The article rebuts criticisms offered of the neo-Durkheimian institutional framework in the literature. Finally, it identifies recent developments and innovations in the approach that make it especially suited to explaining political judgement in government decision-making.

Explaining policy decisions in government has been a central puzzle for political science, public administration and organisational sociology from these disciplines' inception. Most approaches accept that the contexts in, manners by and constraints under which decisions are made influence their content. Yet contention continues about exactly what it is about context, manner and constraint that matters most in shaping just which aspects of content of decisions, and by what mechanisms.

Consider three well-known illustrative puzzles. In October 1962, at the height of the Cuban missile crisis, after suggesting in one letter to President Kennedy the possibility of settlement without an explicit *quid pro quo*, Soviet chairman Khrushchev sent a second letter demanding US withdrawal of a small number of already obsolete Jupiter missiles from Turkey as a condition for withdrawing Soviet missiles from Cuba. Of the US missile deployments ringing the USSR about which he had sometimes grumbled, Khrushchev had not previously especially singled out the Turkish deployment. He and his generals knew the Jupiters' were of negligible military value and that the US would soon introduce submarine-based deployments. Within days, he agreed to drop the demand from the publicly announced terms for the withdrawal. Yet the second letter prolonged the crisis at one of its most dangerous moments.

Such apparent inconsistency in demands strains conventional rational choice explanations invoking maximisation of consistent goals. Prospect theoretic arguments (Boettcher, 2005; McDermott, 2001; Mercer, 2005) might suggest that Khrushchev was on a losing streak and therefore willing to take risks to restore what he considered to be his and the Soviet Union's rightful position. He may well have been in the domain of losses, but this cannot explain the apparent swings in his demands, or his particular selection of risks. Indeed, it may predict much greater risk-taking than Khrushchev sought to engage in by this stage in the crisis. Ideology is no help: Castro's bitterness against Khrushchev arose precisely because the Soviet leader did not make crisis decisions based on revolutionary ideology. Wider ideational explanations (Blyth, 2002; Hall,

1993) also fail: Khrushchev's notion of 'meniscus' could be used to justify almost any decision. Because he made decisions largely alone, group dynamic accounts have no purchase.

Reversing the previous government's policy, British prime minister Harold Wilson undertook a series of both high profile and secret diplomatic initiatives in the mid-1960s with the declared aim of seeking conditions for a truce or at least de-escalation in the Vietnam war. They were resented by President Johnson, regarded by the Conservative opposition as publicity gimmicks, treated by the right-wing press as evidence of Wilson's alarming closeness to the Soviets, criticised by Wilson's backbenchers as inadequate and compromised by his support for the US war aims, and rejected on the same grounds by the North Vietnamese, Soviets and Chinese. None came near being successful. Yet from his first weeks in power to as late early 1968, Wilson persisted, especially in making approaches to the Soviet leadership.

Standard rational choice explanations of Wilson's decisions are strained, because payoffs were low and fell over time. US resentment increased and Labour backbenchers grew steadily more rebellious over his Vietnam policy between 1965 to 1968. If personal grandstanding mattered so much, then this fact itself requires explanation; it must also be reconciled with Wilson's series of secret approaches to the Soviets. The 'domain of losses' argument explains little, because its predictions vary widely depending on the reference point Wilson is assumed to have been working with. Moreover, it is not obvious why in that domain, Wilson should choose risk-taking over Vietnam in 1965 rather than over any other foreign or domestic issue. Conventional historical institutionalism explains little, because Wilson followed neither Bevin's Labour confrontationist policy toward the Soviets nor the Foreign Office wisdom that independent peace initiatives merely irritated the US. Again, ideology is no help, because Wilson was as committed both to the defending the west from communism while pursuing détente as were his predecessors and successors. Groupthink (Janis, 1982; 't Hart, 1990) will not work, because Wilson's ministers were notoriously divided on the initiatives.

The February 1972 settlement of the first miners' strike turned into a humiliation for British prime minister Edward Heath's administration. A subsequent Department of Trade and Industry 'lessons learned' report, drawing on a National Coal Board paper, concluded that the fundamental problem had been the rigidity of the 'N minus 1' pay norm – a policy which 'could only break, not bend'. Heath underlined the phrase in his copy. Yet just eighteen months later, when the second confrontation with the National Union of Mineworkers was developing, Heath was committed to an even more rigid system of statutory pay controls, which again 'could only break, not bend'. The consequence was as humiliating as February 1972.

Conventional rational choice struggles to find payoffs worth pursuing in such deepening of commitment to a risky, costly strategy already diagnosed within government as likely to fail. Alternatively, if being seen to be tough ranked above success in the preference schedule, this itself calls for explanation. Historical institutionalist approaches are of limited help, because the 1972 statutory incomes policy framework was in many ways a major discontinuity which was not yet fully institutionalized. Again, risk taking in the domain of losses is no help, because the previous experience should have changed the reference point, but did not do so. Invoking biases and heuristics provides only superficial understanding. If for example, the availability heuristic is invoked, then why was the 'lessons learned' report not more readily available than the strategy of trying to hold to a pay norm? And why availability rather than any other heuristic? If ideology were central, then we should expect the very opposite of what was decided, for in 1972 statutory incomes policy was accepted with deep reluctance by the Conservative Party and against its ideological preferences. Groupthink explanations fail, because ministers were divided in 1973-4 and did not form a group: Heath's individual commitment dominated.

This suggests that there is room for another approach to explaining political decision-making, which can handle greater complexity in the origins of preferences than standard rational choice, provide content where prospect theoretic approaches are under-specified, and explain inability to 'learn' by way of changing stances which have been frustrated by experience.

The next section summarises the main axioms of a fresh approach, using these three examples to illustrate their use in explaining political decision-making. Some limitations are recognised in some uses of the framework, which have led scholars to be sceptical of its value. Principal criticisms of the framework offered in the literature are then briefly answered. The article concludes by noting some recent developments in the framework, which should give researchers reasons to consider it afresh.

### **The neo-Durkheimian institutional framework**

Developed first in anthropology and known by various names, the neo-Durkheimian institutional framework's central explanatory claim is that, by specific causal mechanisms, basic forms of social organisation and their combinations and conflicts cultivate particular thought styles (Douglas, 1986). In government, what matters are structures of social organisation among ministers, senior civil servants, advisors and leading officials (cf. Coyle, 2006). Here, thought styles are exhibited as styles of political judgement (6, 2004, 2011).

Durkheim's and Mauss' (1963 [1902-3], 11) thesis was that 'the classification of things reproduces [the] classification of [people]'. That is, we paint our own social organisation onto the faces of our problems, opportunities and experiences; in transposed form, through categories that shape our style of thought, we replicate the relations among people with whom we are ordered by informal institutions.

In the neo-Durkheimian causal account, quotidian ritual practices such as etiquette, deference and bonding and assertion, practices for the conduct of meetings or even writing minutes and memoranda, reinforce aspects of thought style including key categories, by entraining and eliciting styles of thought which give recognition to the positions and relations enacted (Goffman, 1967; Collins, 2004; 6, 2011). This quotidian ritual interaction order is much more significant than grand public ceremonial as a causal mechanism cultivating thought style (6, forthcoming d).

Informal institutions in their elementary forms are defined, not in the first instance, as rules, but as more or less entrenched practices (6, forthcoming d), embodying commitments and which specify the positions and relations of social organisation (6, 2011, forthcoming b). By contrast, rules are ‘if... then’ statements, or ideas, which may subsequently be formulated in making institutions explicit to justify or challenge practices.

The framework is based upon Durkheim’s (1951 [1897]; 1961 [1925]) two fundamental dimensions of institutional variation in social organisation – namely, social integration and social regulation. Respectively, these are the degree to which practices, positions and relations are specified by strong or weak accountability to bonds and membership, and by strong or weak accountability to constraint, imperative, prescription, roles and given fact. Cross-tabulating these dimensions and attending to the forms generated in the cells (Douglas 1970, 1982 [1978]) (rather than focusing on the apices, as Durkheim did in *Suicide*) yields the four ‘elementary forms’ (Durkheim 1995 [1912]) of social organisation. These can be observed in differently weighted hybrids among humans generally, including among policy-makers in governments (6, forthcoming b). These institutional orderings are hierarchical (strong regulation and integration), individualistic (weak regulation and integration), isolate (strong external regulation, weak integration) and enclaved (strong integration, weak external regulation – that is, only enough internally generated regulation to sustain strong integration in the absence of external authority or power: Rayner, 1988) (Douglas 1982 [1978]). It follows that ‘hierarchy’ is understood, not as command or domination or any kind of inequality, but, using the anthropological definition, as common membership in a community, albeit among unequals (Dumont, 1980). Thus, subalterns have discrete and respected roles while superiors are also constrained by rules, roles and regulated practices. Coordination in hierarchy therefore cannot simply rest upon command or coercion (as it must in isolate contexts), but on legitimate authority.

Isolate ordering need not only take a passive, downtrodden position, known as that of the ‘structural serf’. Unable to use bonds, authority, incentive or appeal to shared principle, a heavily



constrained and weakly integrated figure in high office faces huge challenges in sustaining that office, when constraints threaten to impose losses. Deductively, the theory predicts that the strategy most likely to be pursued is that of attempting to pass on constraints to others, by imposing them. This is the position of the structural despot (this usage is related to Durkheim's own (1984 [1897], 143-4; 1961 [1925], 44-5), account of despotism: but its current positioning in isolate ordering was first argued by Coyle, 1994; cf. 6, 2011). When passing on constraints by imposition fails, a despotic figure can only accept and absorb losses while trying to survive by coping (rather than, say, dying in the proverbial ditch, as those whose strong integration is sustained by shared principle might). Thereby, the isolate moves from the structurally despotic to the structural serf position. There is now evidence supporting the prediction (6, 2012, forthcoming a).

6 (2013, forthcoming a) presents a scheme of categorical operationalisation for these elementary forms, based on positions, relations and their valences. These provide measures of social organisation which are fully independent of those for the *explanandum* of thought style.

In the first example, the Kremlin in the early 1960s was characterised by a hybrid form in which isolate organisation was especially important, the chairman himself occupying the structural position of an isolate despot (6, 2011). The two Wilson governments of the 1960s were, for most of their six years, highly individualistically ordered (6, forthcoming a, d; *contra* Bale, 1999), around a small number of ambitious, fiercely rival patrons and their cliques of clients. Heath's administration initially exhibited an unstable hybrid of hierarchical and isolate ordering, but Heath's own position became increasingly dominant and isolated from his colleagues.

The framework's *explanandum* is the thought style exhibited by policy-makers. A thought style is defined as

- (i) a consistent pattern of constraints upon reasoning toward decision-making, shown over a series of decisions,

- (ii) which frames appreciation of problems for decision and options available, and
- (iii) which leads to weighting of imperatives, but
- (iv) where considerations concern formal rather than substantive features of decisions, and
- (v) where the constraints and frames are independent of the decision-makers substantive political ideals and of the particular topics decided upon.

Style therefore captures key cognitive and affective forces influencing decisions. Propositions may be believed with greater or less dogmatism. Emotions may be felt about conditions described in propositions, with greater or less complexity and ambiguity. Categories may be used in propositions and their boundaries may be marked with greater or less rigidity or insistence, and with greater or less exaggeration of differences between cases within and beyond a category. This allows for more or for less negotiation, trade-off, hybridity, etc. Aims and intentions may be pursued more or less tolerantly of compromise. Options may be assessed with greater or less attention to their relationship with past choices or with future hopes and fears. Preferences may be more or less sequentially ordered. Style is therefore not contrasted with content, as if it were empty: rather, its content is formal rather than substantive.

Thought style varies independently of ideology. An ideology can be defined as a set of beliefs that, if made explicit, would consist in normative propositions about substantive, long term, general goals for a political system, expressing the relative importance of such aims as equality, personal or civic liberty, tolerance, private property rights, social protection, distributive justice, mutuality, obedience and authority. Thought style describes *how* a policy-maker uses their ideology in making particular decisions, not what their ideology is. There can be enclaved groups of liberals and of monetarists too, while social democrats can exhibit strongly individualistic organisation and thought style in some governments and periods and altogether more hierarchical ordering in others. For example, during the missile crisis, President Kennedy and his chiefs of staff were at

loggerheads, not about the ideological merits of confronting communism in the name of democratic capitalism, but on the basis of contrasting thought styles (6, 2011).

Although Douglas and Wildavsky (1982) had cast the neo-Durkheimian theory using ideology as the *explanandum*, Douglas herself recognised the difficulties raised by, for example, enclaving among ideologically conservative groups (as Durkheim 1915 himself had stressed) and individualistic organisation in left-leaning political circles. Her later (1986) account, therefore, provided fresh micro-foundations showing that the theory performs better in explaining thought style. The present argument provides a sharper, clearer distinction between thought style and worldview than Douglas herself did, even in *How institutions think*, by focusing exclusively on stylistic features of the framing of decisions.

Durkheim's and Mauss' (1963, 11) dictum can now be restated. Thought styles will exhibit *cognitive* relations among categories, etc which are as tightly or as loosely integrated and regulated as the informal institutions among policy-makers lead them to be strongly or weakly *socially* integrated and regulated. Tightness or looseness of social organisation among people is exhibited in the cognitive organisation of relations exhibited, for example, in decision-making between reasons and decisions, preferences in a schedule, issues linked, continuity or lack of it over time. Mixes of forms of social organisation cultivate these thought styles through practices of undermining and reinforcement – specifically, negative rites of blame, accusation, disapprobation, and positive rites of assertion, commitment, deference etc (Goffman, 1967; 6, forthcoming d).

In researching governments' political judgement, style is operationalised using the following measures of (6, 2011, 87-99, forthcoming a)

- the manner in which information is set aside, ignored, rejected when there is more information available than attention for it (6, 2004);
- strategy under uncertainty;
- treatment of particular empirical constraints;

- response to anomalies in categories used (e.g., surprises, unexpected outcomes) (6, 2013; cf. Douglas, 1966; Thompson 1982);
- structure and consistency of preference schedules, which provides either for commitment or for flexibility in strategy;
- risk stance in the domains of losses and gains (which are predicted to show greater variation than prospect theory allows);
- stance toward time (anticipation and planning horizons, reference to collective memory) (Rayner, 1982, Peck and 6, 2006, 50-77);
- relations among reasons, goals and preferences; and
- use of, degree of, and justification for issue linkage.

In isolate ordering, the framework predicts attempts to debar anomalies and then – if and when these fail – their acceptance, loose relations among reasons and goals and preferences, and opportunistic coping behaviour. A structural despot faces strong constraint in establishing the credibility of threat she or he (perhaps implicitly) makes to sanction others for violating constraints imposed or passed on, but their weak integration limits their capability and therefore that credibility. Likewise, these constraints limit the scope for learning of a kind that allows for variation in fundamental strategy. Thus Khrushchev reached opportunistically for a claim which was weakly integrated into his scheme of preferences. Belatedly raising the Turkish deployment after offering to settle without additional conditions, and then agreeing to withdraw without any public concession from the US, all exhibit precisely the stance toward anomaly, attempted imposition and then loss acceptance that we expect in improvising and coping under strong constraint. Indeed, Khrushchev told his son that he was belatedly ‘looking around’ for any concession that could be extorted before withdrawing. Although Heath’s programme for government was explicitly founded upon a commitment to greater hierarchy, increasing isolate ordering among ministers meant that pursuing greater social regulation only served to reinforce isolate judgement styles of constraint imposition (6, forthcoming a). Heath’s repeated attempts to insist on passing on macro-

economic constraints in micro-economic incomes policy proved structurally brittle and debarring of anomalies, only to be followed by enforced acceptance.

In individualistic ordering, by contrast, we expect relations between reasons and goals to be weakly integrated. Weaker constraints will allow action oriented to the medium term, where negotiation among independents and appeals to dependent followers can sustain commitment. The framework predicts that people will choose to bear those risks which place least strain on or ritually enact their social organisation. Thus, in individualistic ordering, personal bilateral negotiations will be pursued to further or at least limit damage to the individual's standing. Wilson, for example, may have been (but after a difficult phone call in early 1965 probably was not) deluded about his standing with Johnson. He was certainly not deluded about the contribution that his attempts in superpower diplomacy made to his standing with voters who expected Britain to play a global role, and with his status vis-à-vis his Commonwealth counterparts, his 'crown princes' and relations with his own client ministers in the individualistically ordered government. The 1965 Commonwealth mission served a tactical purpose in fending off personal criticism at that year's Commonwealth prime ministers' conference.

Under individualistic institutions, a weakly integrated but flexible preparation for possible setback and adversity can be sustained. People will cultivate 'reserve preferences' or motivations for undertaking the risky course which might be achievable even if the substantive or avowed goal fails. This need not be a gimmick or stunt (accusations levelled against Wilson), because the avowed goal may well have been an entirely sincere hope. Wilson may well privately not have held out much hope for the 1965 Commonwealth mission but he seems sincerely to have believed that the February 1967 London talks with Kosygin offered a serious chance. Yet he was careful to ensure that when the matter of the talks eventually leaked, it could be presented in a way that could seek credit for effort – the reserve preference. As expected in individualistic ordering, anomalies among Britain's positions as co-chair of the Geneva process, a loyal member of the western alliance, and as broker, were to be exploited, neither controlled by adjustment nor simply accepted.

Elementary forms of social organisation are subject to self-reinforcing positive and countervailing negative feedback dynamics (Thompson, 1982, 1992, 2008; 6, 2003), which explain patterns of change over time. Under institutions of each form, thought styles are cultivated which lead people to make decisions which reinforce those institutions. Thereby, over time, people assert the application of those institutions over wider empirical areas of activity and exaggerate them. Contrary to the fashionable contemporary wisdom (Pierson, 2004; Arthur, 1994) that positive feedback brings about increasing returns and greater stability, Durkheim showed that, taken far enough in pure elementary forms, it can lead to self-disorganisation (1984 [1893], Bk III; 1951 [1897], *passim*; 1961 [1925], 44-5). Figure One shows the general structure of the framework's causal explanation.

<Figure One here>

This helps us to understand the appearance of inability to 'learn' in cases such as Heath's. In his administration, isolate ordering became more pronounced, especially after Maudling resigned under a cloud and Whitelaw departed for Belfast. As Heath reacted to the industrial setbacks of 1972 by withdrawal and centralisation of decision-making in Number 10, ministerial cohesion declined, and his structural despotic position grew more marked. The deepening isolation ordering within the government provides the best explanation for the government's increasing tendency to use regulation to impose constraints on trades unions and businesses and, when that failed (as it did with the miners in 1972 and 1973-4, with the trades union movement over the Industrial Relations Act by late summer 1972, and with price control on business in autumn 1973), to accept loss but without resilience. 6 (forthcoming a, 2012) uses a causal process analytic approach to show that both the chronology of deepening isolate ordering and growing imperative style with blocked learning in decision-making and the evidence of positive feedback within policy fields provide a richer explanation for the case than conventional contextual, rational or groupthink ones.

Thought styles in each form lead people to react against styles of thought and organisation exhibited in other elementary forms, when they encounter them. This countervailing force creates

negative feedback, which can either sustain conflict and gridlock or may simply produce mutually checking and a kind of fragile equilibrium.

Structural isolate despotic governments are especially likely to face sharp negative feedback when seeking to impose constraints on other actors who are not themselves organised as structural serfs. This is shown by Khrushchev's experience when the US discovered the missiles in Cuba and by the Heath government's experience of the trades union movement's response to the 1971 Industrial Relations Act and that of the miners to that government's attempt to enforce successive incomes policy limits. Isolate ordering affords less capacity than is sustained in individualistic ordering for finding face-saving accommodations in deep adversity, which preserve the government in some order to fight future conflicts on fresh terrain. This makes the contrast entirely intelligible between Wilson's acceptance of the TUC's 'solemn and binding undertaking' in 1969 from which his government recovered its poise by the time of the election, and Heath's government's failure to recover its poise after humiliating setbacks in the first miners' strike and the failure of the Industrial Relations Act in the rail and dock strikes of 1972 and Heath's and Barber's refusal to accept the TUC offer of a face-saving formula in 1974.

Because pure forms tend to disorganisation in positive feedback, hybrid forms are solutions commonly observed (6, 2003; Thompson *et al*, 1990). Hybrids are produced when positive feedback leading to disorganisation in one form creates problems and difficulties for people, who are then forced to develop solutions which articulate other kinds of institutions. They can only reach for institutions of one or more of the other three forms. Doing so creates negative feedback, which may be homeostatic (Hood, 1996), until disrupted by other positive feedback processes. For example, (other than in revolutionary periods or in failed states) a functioning civil service and a system of constitutional law sustain important strands of hierarchy in governing systems. Hierarchy too can be subject to positive feedback, when rules and roles proliferate to the point of baroque illegibility, undermining the very goals of rule-based trust in systems for which these hierarchical institutions were developed. In these conditions, people look to other ways of

organising for solutions. These might, for example, encompass tolerating greater individual discretion. Using discretion to tempering hierarchy might sustain a form of organisation in which an uneasy coalition between the two forms in conflictual mutual dependence can be maintained for some time, with each checking some of the other's excesses (Hood, 1996).

These dynamics can produce complicated outcomes. For example, where policy-makers are organised in hybrids in which hierarchical and isolate ordering prevail, positive feedback in their common institutional commitment to greater social regulation may be intended by policy-makers to sustain hierarchy but may reinforce isolate ordering (6, 2012, forthcoming a). This is one important pathway into an 'isolation dynamic', or a shift toward greater articulation of isolate ordering within the mix in government. It proved to be critical in the case of Heath's administration. However, informal institutions in the Kremlin in Khrushchev's period took a different path into their isolation dynamic (6, 2011).

### **Overcoming limitations in common uses of the framework; answering criticisms**

The presentation of the framework given above resolves many difficulties that have led some political scientists to be sceptical of its merits.

That social organisation explains bias is sufficiently non-obvious and distal to provide satisfying explanations. Instead of looking inductively for particular biases and aggregating them to retrofit explanations to particular decisions, a deductive approach can be taken. Those aspects of preferences which fall within the boundaries of style can be explained endogenously, thus capturing the deeper importance of institutions in preference formation than is recognised by the many shallow forms of endogeneity used in mainstream rational choice approaches. By explaining limits to available variation in perceptions of interests on a wide variety of dimensions of decision-making, theories based on the framework can decisively undermine the implausible postmodernist



claim that thought floats freely from social structure or that it is indefinitely various even in its elementary forms, while avoiding the risks of taking either interests or ideas as simply given.

Using Durkheim's terms 'social regulation' and 'social integration' provides precision, clarifies the theory's roots and avoids the terms, 'grid' and 'group', which some scholars have found obscure or trivialising.

The framework's institutional character is clear: ideas are explained by informal institutions of social organisation, while positions and relations provide proxy operational measures for elementary institutions. Rather than invoking the vague term, 'culture' (cf. Kuper, 1999), this account uses precise terms for the explanatory factors of elementary forms of social organisation and the *explanandum* of thought style, thereby emphasising that the neo-Durkheimian approach is a causal theory, not merely a typology.

One limitation of using worldviews, rather than social organisation, as the explanatory basis (as Douglas and Wildavsky, 1982, did) is that this reduces the argument to explaining particular ideas (e.g., about decisions) by general ones (e.g., about grand political ideals). Yet even if policymakers have clear worldviews, it is possible that those worldviews may be *ex post* rationalisations of particular decisions. Mere consistency between general and particular ideas does not explain the particular ones. Nor does it help to make worldviews the *explanandum*, because, as we have seen, many ideologies can be sustained in different informal institutional orderings. By shifting focus to thought *style* (Douglas, 1986), and by defining thought style sharply independently of substantive normative outlooks, the framework gains empirical content and explanatory power, especially for cases of conflict among people claiming to espouse similar ideologies.

Identifying both cross-sectional causal mechanisms of quotidian interaction ritual, including those articulated in written communications within government, and longitudinal causal processes of positive and negative feedback, shows that the charge (e.g., Bellaby, 1989) is incorrect, that the framework is descriptive and static.

Emphasising the causal relation brings out the methodological importance of using independent measures for social organisation among policy makers, based on informal position and relations (6, forthcoming b), and for the thought styles exhibited in their decisions (Douglas, 1982 [1978]; 1986; 6, 2011). The previous section has identified some principal measures used in explaining political decision-making. Examining particular theories derived from the framework empirically is rather demanding, because one must measure social organisation and thought style separately for the same group of policy-makers and test for expected consonance between them over time, ideally avoiding common source bias. Using a single set of undifferentiated measures (e.g., of ‘culture’) means that the framework can only be used descriptively to identify the presence and relative weight of elementary forms. The explanatory force of the approach is lost, and the impression is given that the framework consists only in its typology.

Too often, studies are conducted on the *explananda* of thought style and the very risky inference is made back to the explanatory factors of social organisation – that, for example, what appears to be evidence of enclaved thought style must be explained by enclaved organisation. This inference is liable to error. In some conditions of unequal hybridity or conflict of institutional forms, people may resort to ‘stolen’ (Thompson *et al*, 1990) or ‘borrowed’ (6, forthcoming d) rhetoric to justify their commitments in terms that achieve acquiescence from people who operate under different ordering. Moreover, appearances on the *explanandum* alone can mislead. For example, evidence of judgement style showing a tendency to insist upon something with great determination and to seek to suppress recognition of anomalies may not be evidence of deep enclaving. It could be – as was the case of Heath’s government – the fragile strategy pursued by those in structurally despotic positions in isolate ordering, seeking to pass on constraints. Only a longitudinal account of what fallback options, if any, are considered when such an imposition and anomaly-barring strategy fails could reveal the difference. Unfortunately, cross-sectional studies are commonly undertaken to examine theories derived from the neo-Durkheimian institutional approach, when only longitudinal research can examine hypotheses about interplay among feedback dynamics. It is very

difficult confidently to assess the relative weighting of elementary forms in hybrid institutional organisation in cross-sectional analysis, when one cannot examine the trajectories of assertion, counter-assertion and changes in response to erosion over time in the patterns of institutional conflictual dependency.

For various reasons, many political scientists have rejected the neo-Durkheimian institutional framework as a candidate for successful explanation of governmental decision-making. The remainder of this section offers brief rebuttals for common criticisms (cf. 6, 2011; 6 and Mars, 2008).

A criticism sometimes made in conversation, but not in print, is that the framework does not address mainstream questions in political science. This article shows that this is misconceived. Few puzzles are closer to the centre of the discipline than the need to explain governmental decision-making. Moreover, in showing how thought style is explained by social organisation, and is independent of ideology, the argument makes an important contribution to the debate about the importance of ideas in politics. Most scholars advocating ideational explanation focus exclusively on ideological beliefs (Béland and Cox, 2011). This article shows that other aspects of ‘ideas’ – namely, those which constitute thought styles – matter greatly for explaining decisions but they are not causally fundamental.

The present argument shows that Sabatier’s (1999, 11) charge no longer stands, that the framework’s concepts are too ambiguous, its links with institutions insufficiently clear for it to be taken seriously as an account of the policy-making process.

The illustrations above show that the framework generates testable hypotheses which show powerful goodness of fit and rich causality while preserving parsimony and generality. For example, using such case studies as those of Khrushchev and Heath, the theory explains why isolates in high office will seek to pass on constraints by imposition, and when they fail, will absorb losses and cope but with reduced resilience, whereas the flexible preference ordering afforded in individualistic thought styles allows for richer sets of fallback options and even for reserve

preferences, which sustain greater resilience to adversity. Again, for example, the discussion of Wilson's decision-making shows that the framework can generate testable hypotheses about the selection of risks borne, where prospect theory can at most say that some risk or other might be run.

The charge that the typology is 'simplistic' has been levelled more than once (see e.g., Marsh *et al*, 2001, 17). As Hood (1998) pointed out, most approaches in fact use *fewer* than four basic forms. Currently fashionable institutional theories often use just three – namely, markets, hierarchies and 'networks' (e.g., Thompson *et al*, 1991; Bouckaert *et al*, 2010). Moreover, the category of a 'network' is not a single elementary form (6 *et al*, 2006). Ironically, some critics complain that four is too many elementary forms for the theory to be integrated (Alexander and Smith, 1996). Both criticisms mistake the framework for its typology. Rather, the causal engine beneath the typological bonnet provides both theoretical unity and models for interactions among forms.

The truth that there is an indefinite variety of 'ways of life' (Marsh *et al*, 2001, 17; Renn, 1992) misses the point. The framework identifies a limited plurality of elementary, not of empirical forms. Satisfying explanations must trade off generality, causality, parsimony and goodness of fit (Przeworski and Teune, 1970; 6 and Bellamy, 2012). Simply describing indefinite variation in empirical forms may provide goodness of fit, but cannot meet these other standards. Marsh *et al* (2001, 17) claim that the framework identifies forms 'but not much else'. The presentation of the causal relation and summary of the feedback dynamics above shows that this is incorrect.

Indeed, as Marsh *et al* (2001, 18) say, people are not fixed in any one form for their whole lives. But the framework itself offers clear and testable explanations for the shifts they make, in response to feedback dynamics and the adversities and anomalies they generate.

Marsh *et al* go on to suggest that the theory is circular, because coding for elementary forms requires the ascription of motives. Again, this is a misunderstanding. Application of codes for elementary forms rests on multiple predicates for social organisation, measured by position and

relation only, not on any aspect of thought or motivation (6, forthcoming b). The unit of analysis is that of social organisation, not the individual.

Sjöberg (1997) made much of the point that elementary forms are not found in pure states. This is true, but the framework offers both explanations for this fact, and a method for measuring relative weights in mixes and hybrid settlements.

Douglas (1986) refuted Elster's exaggerated (1983) claim that all functional explanations are either invalid or viciously circular by showing that the functional loops are ones of positive and negative feedback. Today, it is widely recognised that functional explanations are invaluable in social science (Kincaid, 1990, 1996); even rational choice theorists now accommodate them (Pettit, 2000).

The old charge against Durkheimian theories that they posit 'group minds' will not stand. Douglas' (1986) formulation resting on institutions, and the redefinition of informal institutions as practices (6, 2011, forthcoming d) was introduced precisely to avoid any routine attribution of intentions of the kind that would be required for a 'group mind'. On the other hand, in the special case of strongly integrated and weakly externally regulated groups held together in the absence of authority or power, only by shared commitment to beliefs of a principled character (the nearest thing that social organisation could offer to a 'group mind'), the framework explains both their possibility and their fragility, as a result of in positive feedback and vulnerability to exhaustion or schism (Douglas and Mars, 2003).

The complaint that neo-Durkheimian account of social organisation obscures agency, is also misguided. The framework is therefore not methodologically individualistic, but this feature positively enables it to provide a rich and subtle account of the varieties of forms of agency, described in substantive terms. This is because each elementary form's thought style describes a style of agency. Thus, '[i]n [*substantively*] individualistic contexts, agency is instrumental, strategic, medium-term; in enclaved ones, principled, under foreshortened planning horizons; in hierarchical ones, rule- and authorisation-based; in isolate ones, coping, improvisatory, opportunistic' (6, 2011,

282; forthcoming c; cf. Douglas and Ney, 1998). By contrast, as Hay (2004) has argued, agency in many methodologically individualistic frameworks is really only a relative absence of constraint, lacking semantic content of its own. Empirically, this account performs well in understanding contrasting styles of agency cultivated among policy-makers in the administrations led by Khrushchev and Castro, Wilson and Heath.

Endogenous production of conflict by negative feedback shows that, even though the framework uses functional explanations defined by causal feedback loops, the argument directly contradicts functionalist theory's expectation of a default of equilibrium. It makes use neither of a notion of 'society' (an ill-bounded concept), nor of social organisation possessing 'needs' nor of any automatic process by which any such supposed 'needs' might be met.

If a social science framework is judged by its fertility in generating new hypotheses which are not merely *ad hoc* ways of saving data but which generate fresh predictions which prove to be empirically well-founded (Lakatos, 1970), then the neo-Durkheimian approach must be regarded as 'progressive'. In political science, influential empirical studies reporting support for theories from the framework include Coyle and Ellis (1994) and Verweij and Thompson (2006), Verweij (2011), Stoker's (2002) work on the Blair government, Lodge's (2011) study on regulation, Grendstad's work on citizens' political attitudes (e.g., 2000, 2001, 2003a,b; Grendstad and Sundback, 2003), Richards' (1996, 1999; Archibald and Richards, 2002) studies on enclaves in the Sierra Leone civil wars of the 1990s, Maesschalck's (2004) work on administrative ethics, Bale's (e.g., 1997, 1999) work on the British Labour party, Coughlin and Lockhart's (1998) examination of political culture, Hendriks' (1999) comparison between Munich's and Birmingham's transport policies and Verweij's (2000) study on the management of international rivers and lakes; see also studies in a special issue of *PS: Political science and politics*, 2011, 44, 4, 703-748. Using various methods, data types and analytic techniques, these studies have shown the distinctness of the elementary forms, the robustness of the core association and the explanatory power of the thesis of shaping of thought style by informal institutions and practices. These studies also use slightly

different measures or codes of thought style, ranging from policy preferences (e.g., Hendriks, Stoker, Bale), through political attitudes and especially attitudes toward political risks (Grendstad, Coughlin and Lockhart) to the willingness to act in particular ways in specific organisational contexts (Hood, Richards, Maesschalck).

## **Recent developments in the framework**

Much remains to be done to develop the neo-Durkheimian institutional framework. Although extensive and growing, the empirical literature is still less mature than one might hope. Geometric and diagrammatic representations have been produced to describe the framework's non-linear dynamics of positive and negative feedback (6, 2006). Yet no one has written a full set of structural equations from which precise models of these dynamic trajectories can be generated and specified. There remain outstanding theoretical problems. For example, the issue remains unresolved, whether the dimensions of social regulation and social integration should be understood as ones taking binary values or else as continuously differentiable.

Nonetheless, the framework has recently been developed significantly and some resources in its source formulations have been recovered, in ways that increase its explanatory power in understanding policy-making processes.

As shown above, richer understanding has been developed of the peculiarities of isolate ordering, especially by clarifying the structurally despotic position and its peculiar problems and vulnerabilities. In the same register of identifying the range of positions and relations within elementary forms, the potential for individualistic organisation has become better understood as the role of individualistic patron-client forms has been distinguished, in which cliques of supporters are sustained by general exchange rather than the specific exchange associated with bargaining and explicit negotiation (6, 2011, forthcoming a). Crude conceptions of the elementary forms as being associated, respectively, exclusively with rigid systems of command, unfettered bargaining, extremism and with passive, downtrodden coping, have been replaced with a richer set

of available strategies possible in particular positions and relations within these orderings. The recent developments in providing fuller accounts of positions and relations within elementary forms provide better trade-offs between parsimony and goodness of fit.

Recent work has enriched the framework's understanding of causation, both cross-sectionally and longitudinally. Quotidian ritual cultivation, elicitation and entrainment of thought style is central to the framework's causal theory (6, 2007, 2011, forthcoming d). The framework's origins lie in analysis of differences in ways in which people treat things which are anomalous within their systems of lay classification (Douglas, 1966; 6, 2013). Thompson *et al* (1990) argued that surprises, as one kind of anomaly, can be important points in feedback dynamics occasioning institutional change. New work is examining empirically the hypothesis that anomalies in political classification among policy-makers can contribute to trajectories of positive and negative feedback (6, 2013). The appearance of salient anomalies can lead to significant changes, by way either of positive or of negative feedback, in policy-makers' institutional organisation, thus supporting the second phase of the functional feedback loop back from judgement style upon the organisation of the policy-makers (6, 2006; forthcoming a). In this way, cross-sectional micro-foundations and longitudinal trajectories of institutional change are synthesised in a fuller account of the causal engine than was previously available.

Moreover, the neo-Durkheimian institutional framework can synthesise insights from many other approaches. It explains as substantively individualistic cases, those contexts in which people will adopt future-anchored reference points, and as strongly integrated ones, those settings where people will adopt heavily past-anchored ones. The framework thereby provides content for schematic approaches such as prospect theory, by explaining just which risks and which losses will matter in settings where policy-makers cannot be averse, neutral or loving to all risks or losses: thus, it shows how and why the gradient of that theory's 'S' curve differs among the elementary forms. Some advocacy coalitions may each be – for example – enclaved, but many sustain individualistic ordering among leaders which structures competition. Each elementary form



supplies a distinct time discounting style, which in turn stylises choice; in strongly integrated contexts, appeal to old historical analogies is more likely than in weakly integrated ones; and so on.

In providing a richer account of isolate ordering, the framework enables a more satisfying explanation of when such heuristics as availability might trump other potentially salient heuristics among policy-makers. The framework offers a rich account of full range of institutions which influence political judgement, and of the depth of their shaping, not only of preferences but even of styles of rationality (including the completeness and consistency of preference schedules). In these ways, it offers solutions to some of the difficulties that rational choice and game theory run into, in the proliferation of equilibria and the inadequacy of those traditions' means for accounting for endogeneity of cognitive and affective factors shaping choice (6, 2011).

Janis' (1982) groupthink theory specified insulation and partiality in decision-making groups under external stress, leading to concurrence-seeking. This described one condition of small groups under enclaving well, but lacked the clear neo-Durkheimian account of informal institutions supplying groups' boundaries and forms of insulation. It also lacked positive and negative feedback dynamics to explain change over time. 't Hart (1990) extended the account to bring in 'closed' leadership. But this lacked the all-important distinction between individualistic patronal (e.g., Wilson in the 1960s), isolate despotic (Khrushchev in 1962; Heath in 1972-3), enclaved charismatic and hierarchical rule- and authority-based institutional styles of leadership. 't Hart's account of 'closed' leadership focuses on aspects of thought style which really belong on the *explanandum* of concurrence. Other group dynamic models have been proposed as extensions of groupthink yet actually abandon its commitment to informal group dynamics as explanatory forces. Thus, Preston (1997) abandons collective processes to assert leaders' preferences as given. Hoyt and Garrison (1997) too abandon group process, returning to interests but without explaining whence particular interests arise or how they are selected. Janis' original model showed preferences and interests to be endogenous, and the neo-Durkheimian framework provides a more precise account of institutional endogeneity of selection among interests. Stern's (1997) 'newgroup'

account likewise really describes kinds of individualistic or of isolate ordering at an early stage in the lifecycle of a decision-making body, but again this theory lacks the neo-Durkheimian institutional specificity, and is anyway inapplicable in the three cases examined. The principal ‘extensions’ of the groupthink model therefore either identify hybrid forms between enclaved concurrence and other elementary forms but lack clear accounts of institutional variation, or else, far from extending the model, effectively abandon group dynamics by taking preferences or interests as given.

Because the neo-Durkheimian institutional framework offers a substantive account of what ‘contexts’ consist in, how they change and what their causal roles are, it contributes significantly to the central puzzle of understanding how the way in which policy is made in turn shapes its substance. Researchers interested in policy-making processes and in political judgement have reasons to look afresh at the approach.

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