

## Understanding Institutional Change: Theories, Debates, and Applications (1.5 ECTS)

### Workshop by Giulia Mariani

**When:** 10 (full day) and 11 (morning) November 2025 (1.5 days)

**Where:** University of Bern, UniS, Schanzenneckstrasse 1, 3012 Bern

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**Registration:** [Please sign in by email to kpm.kpm@unibe.ch](mailto:kpm.kpm@unibe.ch) by 24 October 2025.

**Maximal number of participants:** 15 (*first come, first served*)

### Description

New institutionalist theories offer powerful tools to understand how political behavior and policymaking are shaped by rules, norms, and practices. While early scholarship focused on explaining institutional stability, over the past decades, attention has shifted towards examining gradual yet transformative processes of change. This workshop begins with an overview of the new institutionalism, covering its main strands and the foundations of gradual institutional change theories. It then turns to critical assessments of the literature, conceptual refinements and extensions, and the development of empirical tools to observe and analyze change. Lastly, it introduces empirical studies that illustrate how theories of change can be applied to real-world struggles over institutions, with particular attention to dynamics of change *versus* resistance. Taken together, the workshop's sessions seek to provide a structured entry point into the study of institutional transformation and equip students with analytical tools to apply theories of change in their own research.

**Place:** KPM Center for Public Management University of Bern, Schanzenneckstrasse 1, Bern Room A 015

## **Day 1: 10 November 2025**

### *Morning (09:00 to 12:00) – Foundations of New Institutionalism and Theories of Change*

This session combines a brief lecture with guided group discussions. After the introduction, students will reflect on how institutionalist theories relate to their own projects and share examples in small groups before pooling their insights in a plenary session.

#### Basic Readings:

- Hinterleitner, M., Sager, F., & Thelen, K. (2024). Classical institutional theories and institutional change. In *Handbook of Comparative Political Institutions* (pp. 23–35). Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Mahoney, J., & Thelen, K. (2010). A Theory of Gradual Institutional Change. In *Explaining Institutional Change: Ambiguity, Agency and Power* (pp. 1–37). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Streeck, W., & Thelen, K. (2005). Introduction: institutional change in advanced political economies. In *Beyond continuity: Institutional Change in Advanced Political Economies* (pp. 1–39). New York: Oxford University Press.

#### Complementary Readings:

- Hacker J.S., Pierson P., & Thelen K. (2015). Drift and Conversion: Hidden Faces of Institutional Change. In *Advances in Comparative-Historical Analysis* (pp.180–209). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

### *Afternoon (13:00 to 16:00) – Refining, Expanding, and Operationalizing Institutional Change Theories*

Following a short lecture, students will reflect on the relevance of discursive and/or feminist institutionalism for their own projects. The session will then address the challenge of operationalization through group work, where students will explore how different concepts of institutional change can be translated into observable indicators in their research.

### Basic Readings:

- Mackay, F., Kenny, M., & Chappell, L. (2010). New institutionalism through a gender lens: Towards a feminist institutionalism? *International political science review*, 31(5), 573-588.
- Rocco, P., & Thurston, C. (2014). From metaphors to measures: observable indicators of gradual institutional change. *Journal of Public Policy*, 34(1), 35-62.
- Schmidt, V. A. (2010). Taking ideas and discourse seriously: explaining change through discursive institutionalism as the fourth 'new institutionalism'. *European Political Science Review*, 2(1), 1-25.
- Van der Heijden, J., & Kuhlmann, J. (2017). Studying incremental institutional change: A systematic and critical meta-review of the literature from 2005 to 2015. *Policy studies journal*, 45(3), 535-554.

### Complementary readings:

- Capoccia, G. (2016). When do institutions "bite"? Historical institutionalism and the politics of institutional change. *Comparative Political Studies*, 49(8), 1095-1127.
- Emmenegger, P. (2021). Agency in historical institutionalism: Coalitional work in the creation, maintenance, and change of institutions. *Theory and society*, 50(4), 607-626.
- Grahn, M. (2024). Gendered institutions and where to find them: A critical realist approach. *Politics & Gender*, 20(2), 449-473.
- Lowndes, V. (2020). How are political institutions gendered? *Political Studies*, 68(3), 543-564.
- Schmidt, V. (2010). Analyzing ideas and tracing discursive interactions in institutional change: From historical institutionalism to discursive institutionalism. In *APSA 2010 Annual Meeting Paper*.
- Van der Heijden, J. (2010). A short history of studying incremental institutional change: does explaining institutional change provide any new explanations? *Regulation & Governance*, 4(2): 230-243.
- Waylen, G. (2014). Informal institutions, institutional change, and gender equality. *Political Research Quarterly*, 67(1), 212-223.

## **Day 2: 11 November 2025 (morning only)**

### *Morning (09:00 – 12:00) – Empirical Applications: Agency, Discourses, and Resistance in Practice*

This session combines a short lecture with case-based group work. Students will analyze empirical studies of institutional change processes, then consider how actors may resist, stall, or enable change in their own research. Volunteers will present their reflections in plenary and receive peer feedback.

#### **Basic Readings:**

- Josefsson, C. 2024. Resistance to gender-equitable policy change. In *Defending the Status Quo: On Adaptive Resistance to Electoral Gender Quotas* (pp. 26-67). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mandelkern, R., & Koreh, M. (2018). Interrupting gradual institutional change: How ‘continuity agents’ have stalled and even reversed gradual welfare-state reforms in Israel. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 25(11), 1706-1725.
- Mariani, G., & Verge, T. (2023). Discursive strategies and sequenced institutional change: the case of marriage equality in the United States. *Political Studies*, 71(2), 463-482.

#### **Complementary Readings:**

- Ellingsæter, A. L. (2014). Nordic earner–carer models—why stability and instability? *Journal of Social Policy*, 43(3), 555-574.
- Erikson, J. (2019). An ideational approach to gendered institutional change: Revisiting the institutionalization of a new prostitution regime in Sweden. *Nora-Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, 27(1), 22-40.
- Mariani, G. (2020). Failed and successful attempts at institutional change: the battle for marriage equality in the United States. *European Political Science Review*, 12(2), 255-270.

## Assignment

If taking the course for credit, participants are asked to complete a written assignment (5–10 pages, double-spaced, 12pt), due two weeks after the final class (extensions possible if needed). The purpose of the paper is to reflect on how theories of institutional change can be applied in your own research. Building on the workshop sessions and readings, your paper should:

1. *Identify theoretical entry points* – identify which strand(s) of institutionalism (HI, DI, FI, or a mix thereof) and which mode(s) of change (e.g., drift, layering, conversion, resistance) are most relevant for your research.
2. *Reflect on application* – discuss how institutional change theories can help you make sense of your case(s) and/or research question(s).
3. *Consider operationalization* – outline how you might observe or “measure” institutional change in your empirical material (e.g., what data sources or indicators you could use).
4. *Situate your research* – briefly connect your reflections to at least one workshop reading, arguing how your use of theory aligns with, extends, or challenges existing applications of institutional change.