Institutional Change as Statecraft?
Statecraft Theory, Historical Institutionalism and Change

Abstract

This article provides a critical examination of the contribution that statecraft theory, originally developed by Jim Bulpitt, can make to the literature on institutional change. While the approach has been described as historical institutionalist there are some discontinuities which allow it to provide a unique perspective on institutional continuity and change. It is therefore distinguished as part of an agent-led as opposed to structure-led stream of approaches within the historical institutionalist family. The approach holds the opportunity to bring back into focus the imperatives of electoral politics as a source of institutional continuity and change and provides a macro theory of change. It can therefore identify unnoticed sources of stability and change especially in states with strong executives and top-down political cultures.

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Introduction

A second wave of scholarship is re-developing Jim Bulpitt’s original statecraft thesis, first published in 1986, to tackle new analytical problems in different policy areas and levels of institutional analysis. Jim Bulpitt’s seminal statecraft thesis has traditionally been considered to be outside of the mainstream. Until recently, his controversial, but well-known, framework had not been widely applied to empirical or theoretical problems and critical reviews of the approach are few and far between (although see: Buller, 1999; James, 2012: 62-86). This is beginning to change and his work on political elites is being brought back-in from the cold. His article in Political Studies was recently amongst the twelve ‘top voted’ articles published in the journal between 1953 and 2010. David Marsh (2012: 48-49) has recently argued that the statecraft approach is a key alternative organising perspective to understanding British governance. In 2008 Bulpitt’s only book Territory and Power was re-published by the ECPR as part of their classic range. A recent special edition of Government and Opposition examined the contribution of this book to political science. While opinion was divided on his work, the editors of that issue concluded that ‘[t]he Bulpittian framework provides both an original approach and a focus for critical analysis, and in so doing animates the political science of U.K. politics’ (Bradbury & John, 2010: 315). Yet those unfamiliar to Bulpitt’s work may wonder whether an approach developed to explain British politics in the 1980s has relevance today.

This article therefore considers the ‘added value’ that statecraft theory may have for contemporary theories of institutional change. According to Peter Hall, social science has been enriched by ‘explorations of how institutions... structure the behaviour of political and economic actors’. Explaining why institutions change, however, is the next challenge (Hall, 2010: 204). Historical institutionalism in particular, so strong at explaining institutional continuity initially struggled with accounting for change. This question has therefore been subjected to renewed scrutiny with scholars now exploring the role of gradual institutional change (Mahoney & Thelan, 2010). However, there remains a need for further enquiry and the contribution that statecraft theory might have has not yet been critically examined.

The article begins by sketching out the rise of new and historical institutionalism and the common criticisms made of them. It then outlines the intellectual lineage of the statecraft
approach and how it has been redeveloped before explaining how statecraft offers three distinctive contributions to the existing literature on institutional change. Firstly, it provides a critical realist model of change and continuity which has a nuanced theory of structure and agency. Secondly, it re-connects the imperatives of electoral politics to institutional change thus offering a distinct framework for understanding executive politics. Thirdly, provides a macro theory of change. It concludes by suggesting a new research agenda. The approach might provide new insights to scholars wishing to understand institutional change in Britain and elsewhere.

The Rise of ‘New’ and Historical Institutionalism

The central demand of new institutionalists was to take institutions seriously. It was a reaction to the behavioural revolution which, they claimed, saw institutions as nothing more than ‘aggregated interests’. Institutions are not passive objects or merely a site of conflict, but have a dynamic and causal role of their own over policy outcomes. They also wrote in reaction to ‘old’ intuitionalists who defined institutions narrowly as ‘the rules, procedures and formal organisations of government’ (Rhodes, 1997: 68). Institutions should be defined more broadly and include the informal as well as formal. However, there is no one institutionalism. Hall and Taylor (1996) identified three different subspecies, Lowndes (1996) six unique ‘vignettes’ and Peters (1999) seven strains and institutionalisms have continued to proliferate since. As Adcock et al. (2007) note, each developed unevenly and at least partially in response to each other with much of the work now considered new institutionalist pre-dating March and Olsen’s (1984) seminal claim that institutions matter. For the purposes of parsimony, three core ideal-type institutionalisms and their common criticisms are sketched out below, building on Hall and Taylor’s original typology.¹

Rational Choice Institutionalism

An interest in institutions emerged among some rational choice theorists as they saw how the ‘structure of a situation’ could change the incentive structures in which individuals make strategic choices (Ostrom, 1982: 5-7). The rules of Congressional committees, for example,

¹ It has previously been suggested that Bulpitt’s work lies within historical institutionalism. The article therefore focuses on this aspect of new institutionalism.
were seen to structure the choices and information available to its members (Shepsle, 1986). Institutions were not seen to alter preferences themselves because they were fixed and analytically prior to institutions. However, institutions are useful mechanisms for society to ‘prescribe, proscribe and permit behaviour’ (Ostrom, 1990) to induce situations of structured equilibrium and avoid collective irrationality. For example, Williamson (1985), found that institutions were useful in reducing transaction costs and North (1990) argued that institutions can reduce uncertainty.

Such an approach has the advantage of bringing strategic calculations to the fore in institutional change. Benoit (2004: 363), for example, writing on electoral laws, predicts that they will change when they are not in the interests of those with the ability to bring about change. However, it has been criticised for being functionalist because the institutional reform is assumed to occur when institutions ‘fail’ to perform the functions that they are designed for (Hall & Taylor, 1996: 952-953; Peters, 2005: 61-62) and underestimating the unintended effects that institutions have (Hall & Taylor, 1996: 945). ‘Interests’ and ‘institutional failure’ are, at least in part, discursively constructed by agents and some institutions might be dysfunctional but continue nonetheless.

*Constructivist Institutionalism*

At the other extreme in the ‘calculus versus culture’ divide is constructivist institutionalism. This comes in various guises. Sociological institutionalism was the label for an approach that emerged from organisational studies arguing that it was not just rational calculus that determined institutional form but individual action informed by logics of cultural appropriateness. Institutions were therefore defined more broadly to include ‘symbols, cognitive scripts and moral templates’ (Hall & Taylor, 1996: 947). Individuals are not atomised units – they operate within an institutional context of the norms and meanings embedded into society. Choices are therefore limited to culturally (or institutionally) determined options. Colin Hay (2006) identified ‘constructivist institutionalism’ as an approach that built on Peter Hall’s work on policy paradigms. This work emphasises how interests and policy problems are ideationally constructed and these frame actors’ behaviour (Blyth, 2003). A newer strand of
institutionalism, discursive institutionalism, extended the interest into how discourses and ideas are generated and communicated to the public (Schmidt, 2008).

The sociological institutionalist approach was criticised for neglecting power as a source of change and continuity. Hall and Taylor (1996) claimed that it appears ‘bloodless’ because ‘it can miss the extent to which processes of institutional creation or reform entail a clash of power among actors with competing interests’ (ibid, 1996: 954). Power and conflict between opposing groups or agents can commonly be a determining factor in policy change. Anti-foundationalist approaches, such as constructivist institutionalism, can also undervalue the interaction between the material and ideational by giving analytical value only to the latter. Interests, according to discursive and constructivist institutionalists are not given but ideationally created. However, while agents have some autonomy to construct interests, they do not so entirely independently of material constraints (Marsh, 2010: 221-224). Moreover, uneven distributions of material resources can influence which ideas ‘win’ and therefore institutions are changed. For example, organised business’ access to resources give it a privileged position in ‘crisis narration’ and this affects the path of institutional change in economic policy (Hay, 2006: 70-71).

**Historical Institutionalism**

The central assumptions of historical institutionalism, writes Elizabeth Sanders, are that:

‘human political interactions should be studied (a) in the context of rule structures that are themselves human creations; and (b) sequentially ... rather than to take a snapshot if those interactions at only point in time, and in isolation from the rule structures (institutions) in which they occur’ (2006: 39).

It is commonly thought to have its intellectual antecedents in the work of the neo-statists such as Theda Skocpol et al. (1985), who sought to *Bring The State Back In* and the study of American political development (Bridges, 1984; Showronek, 1982) which both developed an interest in qualitative macro-historical, small-n studies. Historical institutionalists distinguished themselves from rational choice institutionalists by emphasising how the motives and actions of actors depend on the social-historical institutional setting (Adcock et al., 2007: 280). They distinguished themselves from sociological institutionalists by having concerns about power at
the forefront of the analysis. Adcock et al. (2007: 288) claim that it is ‘guided by concerns and techniques that are so diverse that they may border on incompatibility’ (ibid, p.261). However, it has recently undergone theoretical development to give it greater conceptual clarity and distinctiveness.

Historical institutionalism typically characterises institutional development as being prone to long periods of stability punctuated by rare and brief periods of instability in which change is possible, but not inevitable (Capoccia & Keleman, 2007: 341). The long periods of stability are explained through the concept of path dependencies. Mahoney (2000: 507) defines these as ‘causal processes that are highly sensitive to events that take place in the early stages of an overall historical sequence’ (ibid, p. 510). Early historical events influence, but do not completely determine, future outcomes. There remains a role for contingency over a series of events and relative uncertainty. He identifies two different types of dependencies. Firstly, self-reinforcing sequences exist in which ‘initial steps in a particular direction influence further movement in the same direction such that over time it becomes difficult or impossible to reverse direction’ (p.512). Path-dependencies are therefore mechanisms whereby institutional reproduction is ensured or ‘locked-in’ over time. Secondly, Mahoney identifies reactive sequences, which are ‘chains of temporarily ordered and causally connected events’ (p.526). One event can set in motion a sequence of events and therefore influence institutional development.

Path dependencies are thought to usually be so strong that change can only occur during critical junctures. Capoccia and Kelemen define these as:

A situation in which the structural (that is, economic, cultural, ideological and organizational) influences on political action are significantly relaxed for a relatively short period with two main consequences: the range of plausible choices open to powerful political actors expands substantially and the consequences of their decisions for the outcome of interest are potentially much more momentous’ (2007: 343)

These moments are often described through metaphor. Krasner (1984, 1988) invokes a metaphor of the changes to an animal species, which might occur due to external shocks such as
climate change or environmental disaster. Elsewhere, they referred to as times of ‘punctuated equilibrium’ (Baumgartner & Jones, 1991). On these occasions path-dependencies can be broken by the ‘contingent’ actions of actors or events and change can, but won’t necessarily, occur.

_An explanation of continuity not change?_

The traditional criticism of the historical institutionalist literature is that its explanation of change is not satisfactory. Peters et al. suggest that there is no theory of change because the aim is to explain continuity (2005: 954-955). The concepts of critical junctures and punctuated equilibrium certainly make the sources of change exogenous to the model and does not help identify what they might be; they ‘fall outside of the existing scientific theory’ (Mahoney, 2000: 514). As Steinmo et al. famously commented:

> ‘institutions explain everything until they explain nothing. Institutions are an independent variable and explain political outcomes in periods of stability, but when they break down, they become the dependent variable... the logic of the argument is reversed from “institutions shape politics” to “Politics shape institutions”’ (1992: 15).

Historical institutionalist theories therefore appear weak at explaining how and why macro phenomena penetrate meso and micro levels (also see: Mahoney & Thelan, 2010: 6-7).

More recent work on institutions has developed partially with this criticism in mind. A range of studies in a collection edited by Streek and Thelan (2005) explain how transformative change can result from the accumulation of gradual and incremental changes which create ‘tipping points’ for more dramatic change. They argue that change can therefore be endogenous to institutions as it results from ‘inherent ambiguities and “gaps” that exist by design or emerge over time between formal institutions and their actual implementation or enforcement’ (p.19). They develop five modes of institutional displacement, layering, drift, conversion and exhaustion.2 These are both a descriptive typology of the ways in which institutions might change and a way of explaining institutional change. The concept of drift, for example, explains

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2 Also see: Mahoney and Thelan (2010).
how institutions require ‘active maintenance; to remain what they are they need to be reset and refocused, or sometimes more fundamentally recalibrated or renegotiated, in response to changes in the political and economic environment in which they are embedded (p.24). In short, institutions themselves can be a force of institutional change because they are dynamic entities. The criticism that too much remains exogenous has therefore been partially answered but still has resonance.

Structure and agency

A second concern commonly raised about historical institutionalism is its position on structure and agency. Historical institutionalists are accused of giving institutions too much power over individuals: they demonstrate how that the institutional settings in which individuals live influences their behaviour but how can individuals shape institutions? According to Peters:

‘There appears to be an implicit assumption of the approach that when individuals choose to participate in an institution they will accept the constraints imposed by that institution, but that linkage is not explored directly by scholars working in the tradition’ (Peters, 1999: 71)

Instead, as Mahoney (2000: 514) notes, ‘the specific choices and “agency” of particular individuals’ tend to be listed amongst those factors which are ‘contingent’ and are therefore given less theoretical or empirical examination themselves. For Hay and Wincott:

‘...historical institutionalism... offers great potential. Whether that potential will be realized, however, depends ultimately on the willingness of institutionalists... to pose again the fundamental and difficult question of the relationship between agents and structures, between institutional architects, institutionalised subjects and institutional environments’ (Hay & Wincott, 1998: 957)

More recent institutional theory notes that agency can be important at particularly contingent moments. Ira Katznelson (2003), for example, argues that institutional path dependencies are central during ‘settled’ times but agency becomes important during ‘unsettled’ times. All four of the modes of institutional change identified by Mahoney and Thelan (2010) involve an agent
of one form or another. However, while there are elements of agency in some of the work considered to be historical institutionalist it is worth remembering that the historical institutionalism paradigm was self-consciously constructed to make the point that change is not easy and that human agency matters less than we normally think. It therefore retains the claim that only in exceptional circumstances do agents trump institutions (also see: Mendez, 2012: 154-156).

However, might Katzenelson’s ‘unsettled times’ be a more general condition than originally thought? In many contexts there might be powerful agents who can readily break institutional path dependencies. In some contexts, might agency be more important than structure? Examining when, where and how crucial agents seek to break path-dependencies can therefore make a crucial contribution to understanding institutional development. In the context of majoritarian democracy with top-down political cultures, this article argues, statecraft is important.

The Statecraft Model

The statecraft approach was first developed by Jim Bulpitt (1986b). It owed much to his reading of Maurice Cowling (1967, 1971) and other historians’ interest in ‘high politics’ in Britain. However, most immediately, the approach was developed to understand the politics of the Thatcher governments. A plethora of literature had developed in the 1980s to try to explain the nature of ‘Thatcherism’ (Marsh, 1995). Thatcherism was commonly described as an ideological project to ‘roll back the frontiers of the state’ (Hall, 1985; Hall & Jacques, 1983; Wolfe, 1991). For Bulpitt these understandings of ‘Thatcherism’ overestimated the role of ideas and ideologies in determining policy. He suggested that it was the art of governing and practical politics that concerned governments rather than following pre-formulated ideational ideals. For Bulpitt ‘much of what is often regarded as significant in British politics – ideology or policy – is of secondary instrumental importance’ (1989: 57).

Analytical primacy is given to the Court which ‘will include the formal Chief Executive plus his/her political friends and advisors’ (Bulpitt, 1995: 518) who are assumed to be self-interested, rational and cohesive actors. The Court’s primary concern is achieving successful statecraft; the
'art of winning elections and achieving some necessary degree of governing competence in office' (Bulpitt, 1986b: 21). They don’t therefore (necessarily) try to govern in the national interest, or upon the basis of ideological views. What matters is winning, and winning again. It will seek to achieve this through the use of ‘governing codes’ which are a ‘set of relatively coherent principles or rules underlying policies and policy related behaviour’ (Bulpitt, 1996: 1097) and ‘a set of political support mechanisms designed to protect and promote the code and objectives’ (Bulpitt, 1996: 1097). These support mechanisms were party management, a winning electoral strategy, political argument hegemony, and most importantly, governing competence (Bulpitt, 1986b: 22). Court’s operated within a structural context which affected their ability to achieve successful statecraft (Bulpitt, 1988: 185).

A second wave of scholarship have taken statecraft theory beyond its original formulation. Firstly, there has been a concern to establish the epistemological and ontological position of the approach. Buller argued that Bulpitt’s neglect of this left the approach open to the criticism of being ‘reductionist and insensitive to empirical criticism’ (Buller, 1999: 691). He anchored the approach within the realism of Andrew Sayer (1992), meanwhile, James (2012: 76-79) uses critical realism.

Secondly, there has been a concern to apply the approach outside of the UK to generate comparative insights. Savitch and Osgood (2010) use Bulpitt’s earlier work on territorial relations to understand Urban Policy in the USA. James (2012) uses the approach to understand the reform of election administration in the USA, UK and Ireland. The approach has also been a template for developing models for actors in different institutional levels of governance. McKenna (2012) devises a model for understanding the statecraft of local government elites, where they, not the Court in central government, are the primary actor to be analysed.

Thirdly, there has been a move to consider how some of Bulpitt’s concepts such as governing competence and party management can be operationalized using research from comparative party politics (Buller & James, 2012b).

Fourthly, the approach has been developed to explicitly explain institutional change. Bulpitt was clearly concerned with constitutional management in the British polity in his earlier book,
*Territory and Power.* However, the importance of constitutional management was not explicitly embedded in the core support mechanisms of the statecraft approach. James (2012) therefore argues that there should be a fifth support mechanism to statecraft theory: *bending the rules of the game.* From this perspective, institutions are considered to be formal, legal-political rules that can be enforced by third parties rather than informal ‘anthropological’ ones. ³

Fifthly, James (2011, 2012) argues that concerns about winning and maintaining power will not always determine the Court’s position on a given policy issue. Firstly, finite time and resources (cognitive limits, legislative time etc.) mean that an issue trigger might be necessary to bring a concern onto the *elite agenda.* Secondly, their Court’s strategic interests may not be affected by a policy issue in every institutional and political context. This opens up a research agenda to identify how, when and why rival Courts perceive a policy area or institutional rule as being central to statecraft, how they go about undertaking change and what the likelihood of them doing so successfully is.

This adds up to a more clearly delineated approach. Where does it fit in the new institutionalist literature? What contribution does it add?

**Statecraft as Historical Institutionalism?**

Statecraft theory provides a fit with historical institutionalism in three, overlapping ways. Firstly, the statecraft approach continued Bulpitt’s concerns with historical context and temporal development present in *Territory and Power.* *Territory and Power,* Bradbury argues, was a ‘realist historical institutionalist account of UK territorial politics’ (Bradbury, 2006: 559) which should be seen as part of ‘the intellectual turn since the 1980s towards temporal analysis of political development’ (Bradbury, 2010: 318). Bulpitt’s work on territorial relations, argues Bradbury, stressed a need to understand political development in a long-term context (*ibid:* 334) a concern that temporal political science should try to ‘periodize modern and contemporary history better’ (*ibid:* 339) and a discomfort with historians and political scientists laying claim to predictive knowledge – all key aspects of historical institutionalism. Moreover, Bulpitt built explanations of change in territorial relations on many of the concepts and terms commonly

³ This fits with the definition used by Steeck and Thelan (2005: 10-16).
used by historical institutionalists to explain change such as path dependency, positive feedback mechanisms and critical junctures (*ibid*: 335-6).

Many of these themes continued in his later work on statecraft. Bulpitt became increasingly vocal about the need for a historical understanding of politics because of his dissatisfaction with the state of the academic disciplines of British Political Science and History and their interrelationship. According to Bulpitt these two academic subjects, shared (or should share) empirical material and analytical analysis but in short did not ‘speak’ to one another. Bulpitt was concerned that political science:

‘now has a less systematic and continuous interest in the past than sociology, economics, and, even, geography. Contemporary political science is confined to a *laager* called “the present”, which is increasingly and profitably penetrated by these rival disciplines’ (*1995*: 510).

For him, ‘the 1190s are as interesting and as important as the 1990s’ (*1996*: 1094). Political science had developed a disease of ‘presentism’ by limiting the basis of empirical research. The result was the importing of ‘rented histories’ where political scientists borrowed accounts of the past from historians to contextualise their own research of the present. This left political scientists reliant on other disciplines/researchers analysis and assumptions. One example that Bulpitt cites is the ‘Post-War Consensus’ which he empirically disputes (Bulpitt, 1996), but which formed the basis of much subsequent analysis of Thatcherism and New Labour. Bulpitt therefore tried ‘to reformulate... [political science’s] connection with the past’ (Bulpitt, 1995, 1996). He therefore argued that ‘political science would benefit from another attempt to reformalise its connections with past politics’ in the form of analysis of Historical Politics (Bulpitt, 1995: 510).

A second important convergence between statecraft and historical institutionalism is the theory of actor motivation explicit in the statecraft approach. For Bulpitt the Court is a rational, self-interested actor. The assumptions of self-interest and rationality have strong connotations in political science because they are the core assumptions of rational choice theory. But the statecraft approach should not be misinterpreted as a rational choice approach. Bulpitt argues that those assumptions of politicians are justified because of the particular institutional and historical context in which elites find themselves in Britain. A single member plurality electoral
system at Westminster, an adversarial party system, the professionalization of politics and lack of institutional pluralism (prior to Welsh and Scottish devolution) combine to ensure that British politicians are constantly concerned with winning national elections above all else. Bulpitt therefore argues that:

‘In combination, these structural characteristics of modern British politics have produced party elites with common, initial, subsistence-level objectives, namely winning national office, avoiding too many problems while there and getting re-elected’ (Bulpitt, 1996: 225).

It is therefore the historical and institutional context of British politics that makes party leaders desperate to win elections because the consequences of defeat...are so awful’ (Bulpitt, 1988: 188). This is significant because it closely fits with the historical institutionalist claim, in contrast to rational choice institutionalism, that the motives and actions of actors as dependent on particular institutional setting (Adcock et al. 2007: 280). In contrast, rational choice theory takes preferences and motives as external and fixed.

Thirdly, the statecraft approach fits with historical institutionalism because it shares concerns about identifying context dependent regularities in the world. If the approach is premised in critical realism then the aim of social research is to identify regularities which are causal mechanisms, whose effects vary according to context rather than scientific laws that enable prediction (Sayer, 2000: 14); this is also a core concern of those seeking establish path dependencies or reactive sequences. Bulpitt’s frequent reference to political historians such as Maurice Cowling (1967, 1971) has caused some consideration as whether Bulpitt’s work fits better within the Tory Historiography. Mark Bevir (2010: 445-446) notes that it is from his reading of eighteenth century British history that Bulpitt draws his concepts of ‘low’ and ‘high’ politics, and local and central elites. His work also overlaps with Cowling’s focus on elite politicians who were considered as being motivated by ambition over principle (Craig, 2010). However, Bulpitt was critical of the a-theoretical approach that historians often took which paid ‘little attention to political science concepts and “theory”’ (Bulpitt, 1996: 1093). He therefore sought a theoretical framework with abstract assumptions. Moreover, the second wave of statecraft scholarship has explicitly used the approach as a framework for establishing regularities. James (2012) uses it as a framework for identifying the causes of reform of
electoral institutions in a comparative perspective. McKenna (2012) uses his local model to understand regularities in local elite behaviour towards participatory initiatives. The second wave of literature therefore consolidates Bulpitt’s differences with Cowling who was not interested in developing such theoretical extrapolations. Cowling thought that history ‘knew nothing and cared less about a “natural or logical development” and had nothing to learn from “cause and effect”’ (Cowling, 1980: 258). Craig (2010: 465-475) argues that Cowling’s writing therefore fitted well with the work of R.G. Collingwood and Michael Oakeshott, however, the same cannot be said of Bulpitt. Bevir (2010) therefore concluded that Bulpitt was too fixed on ‘modernist empirical topics’ to be an interpretative historiographical approach.

**Beyond Historical Institutionalism: The role of agency in change and continuity**

Statecraft theory therefore does naturally appear to be part of the family of historical institutionalist approaches. However, it is also distinct from this. Why? According to Peters et al. (2005: 1284) historical institutionalism ‘lacks any clearly identified source of agency’. For Mahoney, agency is often an unexplained ‘contingency’. However, the importance of agency is clearly present in Bulpitt’s work. What evidence is there of this?

First, throughout *Territory and Power* and his statecraft work the principal agent is attributed a degree of strategic reflexivity. It is able to make strategic choices – even if these are affected by the structural context in which the Court finds itself. Bulpitt describes a range of approaches that the Centre might take towards territorial relations. A coercive power model could be enforced through use of threats and coercion. A central autonomy model could be established in which the Centre seeks cooperation and acquiescence from the periphery. Lastly a capital city bargaining model sees the periphery ‘on top’. Bulpitt suggested that the central autonomy model was more likely to be successful in the UK context. The choice of approaches towards centre-periphery relations is also heavily influenced by existing power relations and resources and past historical legacies (Bulpitt, [1983]2008: 67-69). However, the Centre does have a degree of contextual choice of strategy.

Second, in *Territory and Power* change is explained through historical institutionalist concepts such as critical junctures, but also the strategic activity of the Court. For example, Bulpitt claims
that the ‘old order’ of territorial relations was challenged during the period 1870-1926. This was because of a number of developments such as the collapse of an external support system, social change, the rise of popular government and demands for a new territorial constitution. However, the agency of the Centre was also vital in determining how these broader developments affected territorial relations. The Centre was strategically 'reacting to some of these challenges, ignoring others and trying to construct or reconstruct a viable system of territorial management in an awkward world' (Bulpitt, [1983]2008: 112). Salisbury is attributed with a crucial role. For Bulpitt: ‘Salisbury's general strategy was to delay and weaken the forces of 'aggressive democracy'” (p. 114). His ‘importance [was] that he decided to pursue the code with renewed vigour in the latter part of the nineteenth century’ (p.115). Meanwhile in the construction of l’ancien regime, Bulpitt claims that the Court was posited with favourable circumstances in which it could ‘take advantage of this politically weak periphery to construct a regime more centralised than in the past’ (p.136). It eventually ‘passively accepted’ a system ‘handed to it on a plate’ (p.138). Individual errors/actions also affect political development. For example, 'Mr Heath's "Declaration of Perth" in May 1968 gave a vague commitment to an elected Scottish Assembly without consulting the party in England'. This was as important in the decline of the Dual Polity as any other factor (p.149-150).

Third, in later devising the statecraft approach, Bulpitt gave agency more explicit recognition in the model’s assumptions. A core assumption was that elites were rational, self-interested agents. This attributes them with a degree of reflexivity in their decision-making process. Importantly, agents were not conceived as having full knowledge. They therefore only choose from a limited menu of strategies which are determined by historical, cultural and ideational context. But while these constraints do remain, they are still reflective and purposive agents.

In summary, the Centre continuously finds itself in a strategically selective environment in which some choices are more feasible than others. However, the Court still retains a degree of strategic choice and the decisions made reconfigure and reconstruct future institutional developments. This degree of agency in Bulpitt’s work goes someway beyond that given to it by historical institutionalists and responds to Peters et al. call for a theory of agency to be incorporated into the approach. The revised statecraft approach therefore represents an agency-led approach to continuity and change within historical institutionalism. This stream can
be distinguished from *structure-led* approaches implicit in the original work of Pierson and others.

### Bringing Electoral Politics Back In

One advantage of the statecraft approach is that it brings the imperatives of electoral politics back into the analysis of institutional change and stability and allows public administration and executive politics to be reconnected. According to Peters et al.:

> ‘most scholars working in...[the historical institutionalist]... approach, especially those focusing upon the state, overemphasize the importance of civil servants and bureaucrats in policymaking processes, belittling excessively the continuing (and on occasions elemental) significance of politicians as creative actors’ (2005: 1283).

The role of politicians as creative actors in policy change has often been neglected as part of the growth of public administration as a sub-discipline. According to Lodge and Wegrich (2012):

> ‘the study of public administration seems to have lost its focus on one of its key aspects, namely the contribution of politics (if not ‘power’) to the design and practice of administrative arrangements.’

(p.213).

Yet at the same time:

> ‘the study of politics (ie, ‘political science’) seems to have lost interest in the study of ‘public administration’, treating it as a ‘lower field of endeavour’ (p.213)

Lodge and Wegrich (2012) explain that the result has been that public administration has explored a range of research questions relating to public management reform and policy change but has not grasped the importance of *political context* (p.219). As a result public management reform has therefore been discussed without sufficient consideration of why reforms were adopted at some points by politicians, but not others (p.218-9); the development of
performance management and regulatory regimes has been analysed without consideration of why politicians would want such regimes that might ‘illustrate their lack of progress’ (p.219-20); and, the move towards governance and the hollowing out of the state has been described without pointing to its ‘inherently political nature’ (p.220). They therefore make the case for the study of executive politics which ‘is about the systematic study of the political factor within administrative or bureaucratic arrangements, and about the administrative factor in political life’ (p.214). The statecraft approach is one framework of executive politics which brings politics to the fore and helps to explain a range of sources of policy change by re-connecting public administration with the study of comparative politics and electoral behaviour. It opens up a wider and untapped agenda to note how the strategic manoeuvring of the Court can affect policy development by connecting with electoral studies and comparative politics. The Court’s strategic attempts to achieve its support mechanisms can bring about policy change. The need to develop a winning electoral strategy may mean that they will, for example, quicken, slow or cancel policy change to fit with the electoral cycle. Blais and Nadeau (1992), for example, argue that politicians will tend to implement their most popular policies immediately before an election and their most unpopular immediately after. Likewise, Courts may often seek to redress unfavourable polls with short-term electorate pleasers such as ‘budget give-aways’ may undertake policy reversals if they appear to be unpopular or strategically respond to the policies of the opposition. The need to develop a perception of governing competence may explain why the Court depolitisates decisions by ‘tying ones hands’ and putting policy control outside of their immediate control (Burnham, 2001; Flinders & Buller, 2006). The need for effective party management may mean that policy will change as a Court needs to placate particular wings of their party. The uneven playing field of party politics (Buller & James, 2012a) can also affect policy. Some parties be disproportionately under/over funded such as business parties (Hopkin & Paolucci, 1999) which means that certain policy outcomes are more likely. Courts might also engage in collaborative strategies to make successful statecraft more likely such as party cartelization (Katz & Mair, 2009). This cartelization will prevent some issues entering the policy agenda or being legislated on.

Is Bulpitt’s principal actor designation is still justifiable for researching governance in the twenty-first century. In the first instance, specifying the Court as the principal actor can be criticised for being reductionist (Buller, 1999). Social and political change is multi-causal but this
is an account of change which is organised by and around the interests of the centre. Other factors influencing change are only considered important if they are shown to have an effect on the Court. Yet, as Buller notes, it is not possible to provide a complete study of every actor – thus one must assume analytical primacy. Without being ‘up front’ about the actor assigned this primacy the author runs the risk of simultaneously studying multiple actors at different stages of analysis. The result is description rather than useful theoretical development (Buller, 1999: 700).

Specifying the Court as the central actor may be criticised from the perspective that power is fluid in democratic polities like Britain. Furthermore, a number of fundamental changes have been claimed to have taken place in policy making in developed capitalist democracies which have undermined the capacity of the central state and its managers. Firstly, the imperatives of globalisation have been argued to have affected its ability to exercise direction over policy, particularly over the economy and welfare (Ohmae, 1990; Strange, 1996). Secondly, governance has become more multi-layered between local, national, regional and European levels (Brenner, 2004). Thirdly, the development of ICT systems brought about a rapid flow of cross-border information which made power more dispersed and fragmented (Castells, 1996). Fourthly, the introduction of new public management reforms has been said to reduce the governing capacity of the central state. The privatisation and contracting out of public services coupled with a proliferation of QUANGOs has increased the number of policy actors involved making decisions. There has therefore been a perceived need for ‘joined up government’ (Davies, 2009). These collective changes have been said to have brought about the ‘new governance’ where central national executives have become less active in the making decisions over public policy (Rhodes, 1997). Britain, the subject of Bulpitt’s analysis, has therefore been described as a differentiated polity. Focussing on the Court may seem to be an outdated approach.

That said, there are several reasons why a centre-approach might be useful. First, the national state is not necessarily in demise so its focus remains important. There is a counter-vailing literature to the hypoglobalist school of thought that makes the case that the importance of globalisation on national policy discretion is often exaggerated, at least in some states. Central government managers have often been the ‘midwives’ of internationalisation (Hirst & Thompson, 1999; Weiss, 1998). Second, recent literature on networks questions the pluralistic
nature of contemporary governance that is often portrayed. Greenaway et al. (2007) suggest that policy making through networks is not as democratic as their proponents suggest. Their case of PFI projects under New Labour revealed how ‘powerful actors, or policy entrepreneurs, with their own agenda, still have the facility, by exercising power and authority, to shape and determine the policy outputs through implementation networks’ (Greenaway et al., 2007: 717)

A significant degree of central government power and local elite domination were present, they suggested. Marsh (2008) and Davies (2009, 2011) also separately questions the fluidity of power in networks. Policy network theory implies that there is co-operation and trust between actors. However, networks often have asymmetric power relations and look more like hierarchies.

Moreover, Bulpitt did not always see the Centre as necessarily being particularly strong, or at least, this assumption was not pivotal to his model. His approach to territorial politics was built on the criticism that many previous approaches saw the centre as having power that it did not necessarily have. The Centre was frequently considered to be in a weak position. This was why it was less likely to be able to control the periphery and allowed it considerable policy discretion over policy issues.

A more significant challenge is whether the approach statecraft theory is helpful in contexts other than Britain. Statecraft was argued by Bulpitt to be necessary because of the adversarial institutional dynamics of Westminsterian politics. It follows that the approach would appear to have equal utility in other countries that had similar parliamentary-plurality, ‘winner-takes-all’ constitutional frameworks with strong executives because the electoral imperatives that drive statecraft remain. Obvious examples would be Australia, Canada and New Zealand although Lijphart’s (1999) majoritarian-consociationalist framework provides one crude way of identifying such polities. This implies, however, that the approach might be of less utility in polities characterised by multi-party coalitions, consensual, inclusive and accommodative decision-making such as the Netherlands because the Darwinian logics of electoral survival are not the same and elites might behave differently. This might not necessarily be true, however, because competitive elections might be sufficiently important for informing decision-making. Coalition partners are still concerned about the publics’ perceptions of governing competence and need to manage their party effectively. A more significant reason why the approach might
be less useful in these polities is that the approach ceases to offer parsimony. In polities characterised by multi-party politics, where many parties can play a role in government, which Court do we study? There might be a need to effectively study the statecraft strategies of all parties. Focussing on the Court(s) is still worthwhile because it brings their strategic behaviour into focus as a source of policy change. However, it is a messier exercise. We are less likely to find powerful central actors who can readily break institutional path dependencies.

A second reason, not considered by Bulpitt, why the statecraft approach works so well in the UK is that it has a top-down political culture. As Marsh et al. (2003) note there is a tendency in the study of British politics to ‘focus on institutions and play down the importance of ideas and culture’ (p.310), however, according to them, Britain has a distinct politico-administrative culture. This is characterised by a limited liberal conception of representation and a conservative notion of responsibility where ‘government knows best’, the notion of parliamentary sovereignty in which the executive is ‘executive is accountable to the voters at periodic free and fair elections and to parliament between elections’ (p.311) and an ‘obsession with strong, decisive, necessary action with limited scrutiny’ (p.312). This top-down culture therefore makes the Court the logical focus of analysis for policy change because it accepted to be the key actor within the political system. It follows, therefore, that the statecraft approach will therefore be most useful in explaining institutional change in other political systems where a top-down culture accompanies institutional centralization. This might other majoritarian democracies, but also semi-democratic states and electoral autocracies.

**A Macro Approach**

A third advantage of using Bulpitt’s work to explain policy change is that it provides a macro perspective to understanding institutional change. Theories of policy change are commonly categorised as being either meta/macro, meso or micro level theories. New institutionalist theories are generally recognised as meso, ‘middle range or bridging level of analysis’ (Parsons, 1997: 85). As Evans and Davies (1999: 363) note, the 1990s saw an ‘upsurge of interest’ in meso-level analysis because of the interest in new governance (Rhodes, 1996) to the extent that meso-level analysis ‘became the crucial analytical tool for multi-level, integrative analysis’ (Evans & Davies, 1999: 363). The downside of meso level analysis, however, is that it can make important factors in institutional change, exogenous. As noted above, a common criticism of
historical institutionalism was that it made too many causal sources of change exogenous to the institutions under study as either ‘punctuated equilibrium’, ‘critical junctures’ or ‘contingent factors’. They may therefore miss many important sources of change.

One of Bulpitt’s core concerns was the importance of macro analysis. In his later work he developed a critique of mainstream British political science for suffering from, amongst other things, the compartmentalisation of the study of British politics. Bulpitt explicitly wrote in critique of approaches that only analyse one part of the larger polity. This, he claims, has become the trend in British political science by the mid-1990s. Thus, political parties, voters and the major institutions of government are discussed in separation from each other. He points to how standard text-books on British politics illustrate this. They are divided into on chapters ‘voters, parties, pressure groups, the major institutions of government plus, and these days, a number of policy case studies’ (Bulpitt, 1995: 511). The end result is either a failure to generate macro analysis integrating the polity as a whole or an inaccurate picture of the state as the arbitrator of these groups; in short, pluralism. Such analysis – based on a ‘bottom-up methodology’ creates ‘sociologism’ (Bulpitt, 1995: 512). His alternative was a macro approach, which he admitted was difficult, since it involved ‘some knowledge about a lot of things. Hence, accusations of superficiality are always possible (and plausible)’ (Bulpitt, 1995: 515). But a macro approach would overcome the loss of overall narrative of traditional methodologies.

Bulpittian macro analysis can also sensitise us to otherwise neglected linkages between layers of the meta-macro-meso-micro nexus that emerge from macro political change. For example, at the micro level, policy continuity can be a result of deliberate non-intervention by the Court. Bulpitt noted that the Centre would often deliberately not intervene in a policy area to increase its chance of achieving successful statecraft. For example, he saw race relations as a policy area that had huge potential for political conflict in national politics. However, writing in 1986, Bulpitt claimed that ‘[a]t no point between the late 1940s and the mid-1980s has the race issue occupied a continuous and important place on the national political agenda. Race conflict has had only a sporadic impact on the English polity’ (Bulpitt, 1986a: 23). This was because the Court had sought, and achieved, autonomy or insulation on the issue by seeking to ‘off-load prime responsibility for the matter to other people and other agencies’ (Bulpitt, 1986a: 23). Key to this was the ‘peripheralisation of race problems: their injection into local government and
local politics as operational issues’ (Bulpitt, 1986a: 23). This was largely successful and was one of the ‘great political “jobs” of the 20th century’ (Bulpitt, 1986a: 23). Meso or micro level analysis might explain change in terms of shared values or networks of policy makers. However, while the empirical findings from his case study of race-relations may be less than perfect, Bulpittian analysis uniquely refocuses the lens on otherwise overlooked strategic actors even if their involvement is not immediately observable. Institutional drift may therefore occur because of strategic statecraft. The Court may therefore deliberately depoliticise or try to pass off a function to another actor. Bulpitt’s work therefore inspired recent work on the concept of politicisation (Buller & Flinders, 2005; Flinders & Buller, 2006).

Simultaneously, if a Court believes that their strategic interests are affected by a policy issue in which they previously have not been a stakeholder, they meet seek to intervene. One study which illustrates this is James’ (2010) application of the statecraft approach to UK electoral administration. Electoral administration is a policy area traditionally seen as a micro issue in the UK. There have only been a handful of minor changes made to election administration throughout the twentieth century. This was a relatively minor and technocratic issue which was dealt with by officials in the Home Office, representatives from local government and professional associations. However, from 1997-2007 the New Labour government began to take a political interest in the area because it could solve a strategic problem that they faced. Turnout was in decline in the UK and fewer and fewer of Labour’s ‘core vote’ were sufficiently enthused to vote on polling day. Other solutions such as amending the electoral system to proportional representation were a ‘no go’ because it would adversely affect the power of the party. In short, by tracing the interests of the elite and by using macro analysis it is possible to identify how macro-level agents may intervene in policy areas and bring about change.

Strategic intervention and non-intervention is also important at meta level international affairs. In the domain of foreign policy, governing competence ‘denotes the specific tactics employed to minimise the adverse impact of external forces on domestic politics in ways acceptable to the governing party, and, in the process, make life difficult for opposition groups’ (Bulpitt, 1988: 195-196). Bulpitt further suggested a number of ‘ploys’ can commonly be used to achieve
governing competence on foreign policy: foreign policy successes,⁴ rational inactivity, deliberate politicization, the reversal of assignments and Britain’s role in concentric circles (Bulpitt, 1988: 195-199). Bulpitt advised that non-intervention into a range of foreign affairs was often the wisest approach. Public sector management reforms and the (non)presence of policy networks at the meso level may also owe much to the strategic activity of the Court – or the historical legacies and unintended consequences of such activity.

One disadvantage of a macro approach is that it is overkill – we are taking an analytical sledgehammer to crack a nut. We therefore lack the finer detailed analysis which comes with meso level analysis. However, it is possible to combine the statecraft approach with compatible meso and micro theories. For example, James (2011, 2012) argues that the interest of the Court in election administration ebbs and flows according to an issue agenda and the nature of the constitutional and party system. Policy triggers are identified which may make the Court interested in election administration such as ‘administrative failure’, declining turnout or the availability of new technology. Micro or meso level factors can therefore feed up to the macro level to bring about change, but they must commonly navigate through the macro level. Other conceptual tools from the academic literature on the policy process, agenda cycle and comparative political parties can therefore be used in accompaniment to examine the problem in hand.

In summary, new institutionalism self-consciously focussed on meso level analysis because of the perceived presence distinct policy arenas, policy communities and vertical silos in government. However, a Bulpittian focus on the strategic activity of the Court helps to explain both institutional continuity and change by identifying how this actor allows institutional drift provides critical junctures and therefore sensitises analysis to new sources of institutional change.

⁴ Bulpitt called these ‘conflict resolutions’ but suggested that ‘this is an up-market label for what in plainer English would be called foreign policy successes’. For the sake of clarity, it seems easier to just accept the ‘bog standard’ term.
Conclusion

This article has sought to establish where statecraft theory ‘fits’ in the search to explain institutional change and evaluate its added value. As C.S. Lewis said: ‘What you see and what you hear depends a great deal on where you are standing’; and indeed, what you are looking at! The statecraft approach focuses analysis around one critical actor. This means that the approach is open to the criticism of being reductionist because it misses other sites of conflict which might influence the institutional change. It may therefore be more likely to miss more important venues for change in contexts where the Court is less important. Yet the centre is a central actor in many states which does have the power to break and shape path-dependencies. Statecraft theory therefore allows us to identify, when, where and why it is and isn’t willing or able to try to do this and sensitises analysis to some under explored factors of institutional change. Firstly, the approach offers a nuanced critical realist model of change (and continuity) based in structure and agency rather than just path dependencies. It thereby provides an agent-led theory of change within historical institutionalism. Most historical institutionalists fail to specific the key critical actor of focus and this inhibits agency. Secondly, it brings back into focus the importance of electoral politics which were not always clear in the work of the neo-statists. Thirdly, it provides a macro approach which can thereby identify unnoticed sources of stability and change. A new generation of scholarship may therefore find fresh insights from using it, possibly in combination with other conceptual tools from historical institutionalism and public administration, to understand continuity and change in Britain and elsewhere.
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