

New Institutionalism and Public Administration: A Review of Theories and Concepts

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While various social science disciplines have dominated the recent spate of scholarly work in institutionalism, the study of institutions itself is not new in public administration. The study of public organizations and institutions has highlighted legal structure and cognitive design as well as culture and norms in understanding organizational behavior, which has contributed to a bifurcated view of institutions as either formal or informal. New institutionalism highlights that while regulative formal institutions can serve as lamp posts to political, social and economic behavior, normative informal institutions can oftentimes encompass a wider institutional field beyond political jurisdictions. This paper looks at the evolution of institutionalism from a public administration perspective and provides an overview of how new institutionalism can be the lens to comprehend the fundamental issues of governance and development.

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There is no doubt that institutions matter. As institutional reforms increasingly inform international development agenda, there is growing awareness of the significant impact of institutions on governance, economic development and society in general. While the current interest on institutions has produced a new wave of perspectives in the literature, several landmark publications continue to underpin theories of institutionalism. Douglass North (1990) shaped contemporary thought on institutionalism by looking at institutions as the “rules of the game” and the “humanly devised constraints that structure political, economic and social interactions” (p. 97). North’s work highlighted the centrality of

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