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## Discursive Institutionalism and Institutional Change

**Abstract** *This paper outlines relevant aspects of institutional theory in social sciences and gives a more detailed overview of the New Institutionalist approaches. Moreover, the paper explores Discursive Institutionalism, one of the newest theoretical approaches to institutions, and discusses its application in empirical research. The aim of the article is to bring this innovative theoretical framework closer to the academic community and practitioners who are interested in exploring public debates in interaction with institutions.*

**Keywords:** *institutional theory, Discursive Institutionalism, Vivien Schmidt*

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### Introduction

This study offers an overview of institutional theory in social sciences and illustrates the change in studying institutions over time. The article starts with Old Institutionalism, which focuses on structural elements in institutional change, and continues by examining the behaviourist approaches and maximisation of individual's self-interest as an explanation of institutional change. The article elaborates in more detail the New Institutionalist approaches, their basic assumptions and inter-connectedness.

The main focus of this article, however, is the newest approach to the study of institutions and the one of the New Institutionalisms with the strongest focus on policy change – Discursive Institutionalism (DI). This theory proposes that public discourse, in its formulation of idea and the communication of that idea, has a potential to influence public policy. The aim of the article is to invite researchers and practitioners, studying discourse and institutions, to consider this theoretical tool and contribute to its development.

The topic will be discussed in two main sections. The article, first, gives general background of institutional theory by the mid-1960s and discusses the approaches within New Institutionalism. In the second part, the article focuses on Discursive Institutionalism, its explanation of institutional change and methodological limitations of the theory.

### Institutional Theory

The role of institutions in shaping political and social life is the main focus of institutional theory. In order to distinguish institutions from other forms

of human organisation, institutions are defined within this approach as formal and informal structures with stability over time and the ability to adapt (Peters 2012: 19). Individuals, who are affiliated to institutions, can make an impact on these institutions by promoting certain values and meanings, or by imposing rules and incentives. On the other hand, institutions transcend the individual, which implies that individual behaviour is, to a certain extent, predictable. Institutions can be differentiated according to the degree of formalization, the degree to which they are collectively binding, whether they are 'self-reinforcing' or require intervention by some sort of meta-institution. As for their function, institutions are conceptualised, in institutional theory, as mediators and regulators of human liberation – both from social bonds and from constraints of nature.

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Research on politics between the mid-nineteenth and the mid-twentieth century was mainly focused on political, legal and administrative structures; and political studies were identified by an analysis of institutions (Lowndes 2013: 22–28; Peters 2012: 6; Lowndes 2002: 90). This approach, known as Old Institutionalism, had several distinctive features. For instance, the view that law and the role of the law in governance have priority in political analysis, as law dominates individual behaviour. Moreover, prominent persons, or the Great Men of history, can make significant impact on institutions (Peters 2012: 3–11). The formation, design and change of institutional settings were considered strictly related to the history of a society. Therefore, the Old Institutionalists argued that the development of a system could be predicted if analysts identified the most important features of the structure (Peters 2012: 8). Moreover, Old Institutionalism was a normative theory as, from an analytical point of view, it did not address facts and values separately, that is to say the legal framework and the system of values, but rather they were approached as a whole.

By the 1950s, Old Institutionalism had been pushed into the background by approaches based on behaviouralism and rational-choice theory. The former relates to social-psychological assumptions about individual behaviour, while the latter assumes that an individual action is the result of cost-benefit calculation with the goal of maximising self-interest. The shift of focus onto individual behaviour emerged as a reaction to Old Institutionalism and its limitations, which include an over-emphasised importance placed on structure. Moreover, amongst other drawbacks, Old Institutionalism under-analysed the role of individual behaviour in collective action and decision-making; Old Institutionalism involved certain methodological limitations, and the nature of the approach was more descriptive than analytical (Peters 2012: 3).

Behaviourist approaches tended to address 'facts' separately from values in order to reduce the normative aspects of the theory to a minimum. Moreover, the main argument of the behaviourist approach is that certain factors, such as self-interest and utility, maximisation-oriented decision-making, condition human behaviour regardless of the institutional setting and the socio-historical context in which decisions are being made. As far as political analysis is concerned, these assumptions led to the general conclusion that individual behaviour is exogenous to the political process (Peters 2012: 12–16).

The shift from structural assumptions to an individualistic approach in political analysis had significant implications on methodology. Rational choice and behaviourist approaches required new methods of research, which would enable micro-level analysis and the quantification of individual behaviour. Moreover, there was a need for the development of theoretical frameworks, which would make the analysis of politics closer to the research being undertaken in natural sciences.

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In the late 1960s, as a reaction to the limitations of the behaviourist and rational choice approaches to politics, such as methodological individualism and concerns with theory development and anti-normative bias (Peters 2012: 12–16), Institutionalism re-emerged in a new form. Guy B. Peters points out: „The new institutionalism grew up not so much merely to reassert some of the virtues of the old form of analysis but more to make a statement about the perceived failings of what had come to be the conventional wisdom of political science“ (Peters 2012: 11). The era of New Institutionalism began with the seminal work of James March and Johan Olsen (1984) and other literature that focused on bringing institutions back into political research (Almond 1988).

### New Institutionalism

The assumption of New Institutionalism is that, as Lowndes posits, „institutions do not necessarily 'fit' together to form a whole, or represent functionally desirable solutions“ (Lowndes 2002: 100). Therefore, New Institutionalism analyses institutions as disaggregated concepts – not holistic ones – and focuses on their components, such as electoral systems, immigration policy or international relations. Moreover, institutions have internal norms and values that facilitate power relations within them by favouring some solutions over others or including some actors and excluding others. New Institutionalists do not observe institutions in a vacuum, outside of time and space. They argue that institutions are embedded in a particular context, either in the historical background or in the system of structural constraints and incentives. The common ground between the

different approaches of New Institutionalism is the argument that individual behaviour is relevant for political analysis and that this behaviour can have a significant impact on institutions. However, they also agree that the action of individuals takes place within an institutional framework – regardless of the differences in defining institutions – that shapes or facilitates their action.

There are several analytical continua along which New Institutionalism shifted the focus in political research and ensured a wider and more dynamic analytical framework compared to the Old Institutionalism (Lowndes 2002: 97). First, New Institutionalism changes the concept of institutions by introducing both rules and behaviour into the definition. Instead of being understood only as formal organisations, institutions are viewed as a „stable recurring pattern of behaviour“ (Goodin and Klingemann 1996: 22).

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Secondly, Lowndes emphasises the dynamic element in the conceptualisation of institutions that results from the shifting of focus from a one-way influence of institutions on individuals to the interaction between institutions and individuals. These novelties are mostly developed by the approaches within the rational choice wing of the New Institutionalism. Lastly, New Institutionalism questions the neutrality of the embedded institutional values and argues that values are contested concepts in constant change. Their perceived neutrality, according to Lowndes (2002), comes from the theoretical assumptions of Old Institutionalism that values are fixed, embedded and shaped.

The diversity of approaches within New Institutionalism brought about a debate concerning the distinctiveness of these streams of thought. The number of approaches varies depending on the analyst's position concerning the ontological and epistemological assumptions of the approaches within New Institutionalism. While March and Olsen (1984) considered New Institutionalism using a single approach, Peter A. Hall and Rosemary Taylor (1996) differentiated from this position suggesting three approaches. In the latest edition of his seminal book, *Institutional Theory in Political Science: The New Institutionalism* (2012), Guy Peters offers an analysis of seven new institutional approaches. Lowndes and Robert, in their recent publication *Why Institutions Matter* (2013) identify nine subtypes (2013: 31). Based on the current literature, however, it is reasonable to argue that New Institutionalism includes more than ten theoretical sub-approaches, which are Historical Institutionalism, Rational Choice Institutionalism, Sociological Institutionalism, Normative Institutionalism, Empirical Institutionalism, International Institutionalism, Network

Institutionalism, Actor-oriented Institutionalism, Constructivist Institutionalism, Discursive Institutionalism and Feminist Institutionalism.

The approaches within New Institutionalism can be grouped around two positions in relation to their positivist or constructivist nature (Hall and Taylor 1996: 940–941). On the positivist side, there are calculus-oriented approaches including Rational Choice Institutionalism, Actor-oriented Institutionalism, and certain approaches within Empirical Institutionalism. On the constructivist side, there are culture-based approaches, such as Sociological Institutionalism, which is focused on „values, norms, interests, identities and beliefs“ (March and Olsen 1989: 17), as well as Normative, Feminist, Constructivist and Discursive Institutionalism. The classification is less straightforward when it comes to Historical Institutionalism, since a part of this literature is close to rational-choice theory (Immergut 1992; Hall and Soskice 2001; Thelen 2004; Streeck and Thelen 2005), while other studies come from the culturalist tradition (Katzenstein 1996; Dobbin 1994). International Institutionalism and Network Institutionalism also develop in two directions, and explain behaviour both as norm-governed and strategic.

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Another debate concerning New Institutionalism is to what extent the approaches are distinctive and incompatible, or would these approaches benefit from cross-fertilisation. Hall and Taylor (1996) argue that New Institutionalism would benefit from intellectual borrowings if institutionalist scholars renounced their most extreme positions at the positivist-constructivist spectrum. Knill and Lenschow (1999) argue the opposite: the different streams of thought within New Institutionalism can benefit precisely from the fact that their differences are unbridgeable. Current literature views New Institutionalism as a multi-theoretical approach (Peters 2012; Lowndes 2002) within which the different approaches can benefit from each other, if the links between them grow stronger and become more relevant than the links which bind the approaches to the traditions from which they are derived (Schmidt 2008).

Further to this point, Lowndes (2013) argues that the New Institutionalisms are currently in a state of convergence, as researchers do not focus exclusively on one of the dimensions of institutions. Instead, according to Lowndes, institutions are increasingly viewed as structures which are organised by rules, practices and narratives at the same time. As the studies are problem-oriented, the sub-types of institutional theory can be used instrumentally, according to their ability to offer insight into the studied problem. The following table outlines characteristics of the three types of institutional constraints in relation to political analysis:

	<b>Rules</b>	<b>Practices</b>	<b>Narratives</b>
<b>How we recognize them</b>	Formally constructed and recorded	Demonstrated through conduct	Expressed through the spoken word
<b>Empirical examples</b>	Clauses in a constitution, terms of reference, national and international laws	How elected members conduct themselves in parliaments, assemblies, or local councils	Speeches by politicians explaining the need for change; the collections of stories in an organization which justify the status quo
<b>Enactment by actors through</b>	Writing and formal interpretation – e.g. law to policy documents to guidance	The consistent rehearsal of „the ways in which we do things around there“	The linking together and spoken expression of ideas in to explanation and persuasion
<b>Impact on actors through</b>	Reading representations and interpretations of rules (e.g. speed limit signs, procedure manuals)	Observing the routinized actions of members of the group and seeking to recreate those actions	Hearing familiar stories and recognizing shared understandings to the point where the normative implications are taken for granted
<b>Sanctioned by</b>	Coercive action through formal rewards and punishment	Displays of disapproval, social isolation, and threats of violence	Incomprehension and ridicule, and attempts to undermine the reputation and credibility of non-conformists
<b>Interconnections between modes</b>	Narratives are often used to justify the existence of rules; rules often formalize well-established practices	Practices often form the basis of narrative; rules may specify the practices through which actors must enact the rules	The case for changing the rules is usually made in narrative form; narrative accounts can present prevalent practices in a positive or negative light
<b>Indicative research methodologies</b>	Documentary analysis, laboratory studies including the use of games, mathematical modelling	Observation of conduct in formal meetings and behind the scenes, ethnographic approaches	Interviewing actors and recording their stories, seeking verbalized explanations for policies, narrative analysis of speeches and interviews

Table 1. Modes of Institutional Constraint: Key Characteristics (Lowndes 2013: 52–53)

## New Institutionalism and Ideas

The ability of New Institutionalism to empirically explore institutional impact on political behaviour became increasingly challenged over the past decade (Przeworski 2004). The shift of focus in New Institutionalism towards the topic of ideas and ideational processes is often explained as a reaction to the limitations of other new institutionalist approaches to analyse change and to assess the impact of institutions on politics. This change was named differently, as the „ideational turn“ by Blyth (2002), or as constructivist institutionalism by Hay (2006) and as strategic constructivism by Jabko (2006). The name Discursive Institutionalism (Campbell and Pedersen 2001) was adopted by Vivien Schmidt (2010a, 2008) who gathered these streams of thought in one theoretical approach. According to Schmidt, „the turn to ideas undermines the basic premises of the older institutionalisms, i.e. that institutions are in stable equilibria, with fixed rationalist preferences (RI) [Rational Choice Institutionalism], self-reinforcing historical paths (HI) [Historical Institutionalism], or all-defining cultural norms (SI) [Sociological Institutionalism]“ (Schmidt 2008: 304).

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In rational-choice theory, ideas are mainly viewed as instrumental and as a result of interests, which are separable from ideas. With the ideational shift, rational choice theory became more inclined to see ideas as an important factor in political decision-making, even though only as incentives in the interest-maximisation calculation. The group of approaches around Sociological Institutionalism, such as the Normative, Feminist and Constructivist, have always considered that ideas and norms frame action. However, from this perspective, ideas are viewed as socially-constructed static structures (Schmidt 2010a: 320). Historical Institutionalism, in its non-ideational tradition, acknowledges the importance of ideas in institutional change, but only to a certain extent. For instance, when strong institutional obstacles or the lack of appropriate framing resources hamper political actors from promoting alternative policies, ideational processes appear to be a useful tool in influencing policy change.

On the other hand, the ideational side of Historical Institutionalism argues (Béland 2009) that ideas – defined by Parsons as „claims about descriptions of the world, causal relationships, or the normative legitimacy of certain actions“ (Parsons 2002: 48) – are relevant to the process of policy-making as much as the institutional legacy. Moreover, Béland

(2009: 703) identifies three ways in which ideas can influence institutional change. First, ideas are instrumental in defining a problem as a priority in the policy-making process. Secondly, ideas can shape the content of the policy that addresses the problem. Lastly, ideas underlie strategies, which political actors use in order to ensure public support for their policies. Therefore, ideas, when developed into a discourse, can facilitate change by influencing public opinion and convincing interest groups, and the public, that policy change is or is not necessary (Blyth 2002: 4; Schmidt 2002).

### **Discursive Institutionalism**

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Discursive Institutionalism (DI) embraces approaches to discourse from various perspectives, and with different ontological and epistemological assumptions. The comparison between DI and other new institutionalisms reveals differences concerning the conceptualisation of agency and institutional change. Historical Institutionalism stresses structure more than agency, and when it comes to explaining agency, Historical Institutionalism turns either to Rational Choice Institutionalism or Sociological Institutionalism. These two, however, offer a static and equilibrium-focused explanation of agency. On the other hand, Rational Choice Institutionalism argues that ideational processes are a useful explanation for change only when the primary explanation related to objective or material interests proves to be inefficient (Goldstein and Koehn 1993). As a response to that view, Boudon (2003) argues that rationality should not be understood as instrumental, but as cognitive, while actions should be explained in terms of their meaning to the actor, instead of being viewed as a result of interest-based decision-making. This view suggests that interests are inseparable from ideas, and both are subjective. Discursive Institutionalists, as Schmidt points out, analytically separate material interests into material reality and interests and „take the actual responses to material reality as their subject of inquiry“ (Schmidt 2010b).

According to Schmidt and Radaelli, DI „helps to overcome the structure-agency divide and, thereby, to explain the dynamics of change by lending insight into how actors in different institutional contexts with new ideas may overcome entrenched interests, institutional obstacles and cultural impediments to change“ (Schmidt and Radaelli 2004: 207). DI explores institutional change by focusing on institutions, interests and norms from the perspective of discourse.



There are several common elements in research on institutions from the discursive perspective. Firstly, institutions are primarily concerned with ideas, in comparison to other approaches, which are primarily concerned with interests, values or institutional performance. Secondly, these elements analyse ideas within an institutional setting and emphasise the relevance of social, political and historical context on the formation and development of discourse. Thirdly, DI does not assume that discourse is the only dimension of political life, but that discourse should be taken into account, together with structural constraints, in the analysis of politics. Lastly, the discursive institutionalists give weight to the logic of communication and the interactive process of conveying ideas, which gives dynamic to their explanation of institutional change.

As for research interests, discursive institutionalists are concerned with a wide range of topics, different contexts and different levels of discourse analysis. As Schmidt explains, the difference that lies between discursive institutionalists is in „the kinds of questions they ask and the problems they seek to resolve, which tend to come from the institutionalist tradition(s) with which they engage“ (Schmidt 2008: 304). It is possible, however, to identify the common key issues that discursive institutionalists are currently focused on. The main debates are related to the relationship between ideas and political action, strategies of public persuasion, the importance of deliberation for political legitimacy and the concept of change in history and culture (Schmidt 2008: 305).

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Schmidt insists on the same epistemological status of discourse analysis as the other new institutional approaches have (Schmidt 2010a: 47). However, she explains that DI does not stand in opposition to or independently from other new institutional approaches. Instead, as Schmidt notes, „discourse institutionalism offers a framework within which to theorize about how and when ideas in discursive interactions may enable actors to overcome constraints that explanations in terms of interests, path dependence, and/or culture present as overwhelming impediments to action“ (Schmidt 2006: 5). Thus, with its inclusive and eclectic nature, DI can significantly contribute to reconciliation between the new institutionalist approaches and help bridge the division between the positivist and constructivist views on discourse.

The following table, by Vivien Schmidt (2011a: 5), summarises the ontological and epistemological assumptions of the approaches which theorists consider the three main stands within New Institutionalism.

	<b>Rational Choice Institutionalism</b>	<b>Historical Institutionalism</b>	<b>Sociological Institutionalism</b>	<b>Discursive Institutionalism</b>
<b>Object of explanation</b>	Behaviour of rational actors	Structures and practices	Norms and culture of social agents	Ideas and discourse of sentient agents
<b>Logic of explanation</b>	Calculation	Path-dependency	Appropriateness	Communication
<b>Definition of institution</b>	Incentive structures	Macro-historical structures and regularities	Cultural norms and frames	Meaning structures and constructs
<b>Approach to change</b>	Static-continuity through fixed preferences [...]	Static-continuity through path dependency interrupted by critical junctures	Static-continuity through cultural norms and rules	Dynamic-change (and continuity) through ideas and discursive interaction
<b>Explanation of change</b>	Exogenous shock	Exogenous shock	Exogenous shock	Endogenous process through background ideational and foreground discursive abilities
<b>Recent innovations to explain change</b>	Endogenous ascription of interest shifts through RI political coalitions or HI self-reinforcing or self-undermining processes	Endogenous description of incremental change through layering, drift, conversion	Endogenous construction (merge with DI)	Endogenous construction through reframing, recasting collective memories and narratives through epistemic communities, advocacy coalitions, communicative action, deliberative democracy

Table 2. The four New Institutionalisms (Schmidt 2011a: 5)

## Discursive Institutionalism: key concepts

The basic proposition of Discursive Institutionalism is that institutions are defined by ideas, which members of the institution put forward in public debates. According to DI, institutions are defined by ideas and the ways these ideas are communicated by individuals. This conceptualisation of structure/agency is new to institutional theory, as ideas are inherent to individuals and to exogenous elements such as norms, values or interests. Therefore, according to DI, institutional change can be triggered by any member of an institution, depending on the power of their discourse to put forward their ideas. Moreover, this implies that, besides the structure/agency dichotomy, DI brings a novel approach to the nature of ideas as endogenous and inherent to individuals.

Moreover, DI conceptualises the institution both as fixed and contingent, which makes the idea of an institution less structural than in other approaches within institutional theory. Institutions are changing and becoming, through the process of communication of ideas, which makes them fixed and contingent at the same time. In order to understand the principle of institutional change in DI, it is necessary to understand institutions as a given environment in which political actors think, speak and act. At the same time, institutions are contingent on the thoughts, words and actions of actors. DI argues that institutions are structures, which constrain the action of actors working inside them, and which are, at the same time, created and changed by actors.

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Schmidt (2002, 2006; Schmidt and Radaelli 2004) introduces the concept of discourse in political analysis and explains discourse's two-fold nature. Schmidt differentiates between *discourse as content*, which is „the substantive content of ideas“, and *discourse as process*, which involves „the interactive processes that serve to generate those ideas and communicate them to the public“ (Schmidt and Radaelli 2004: 197).

According to DI, ideas can be differentiated according to their content and the level of the generality as myths, programmes, narratives and so forth. As opposed to other new institutional approaches, DI offers a three-dimensional explanation of the concept of ideas. Firstly, in terms of their form, ideas can be myths, narratives, frames, memories and so forth. Secondly, ideas can be differentiated according to their level of generality as policies (that is, specific solutions to the problem put forward by policymakers), programmes (which contain and support individual policies) or paradigms and philosophies (which represent platforms based

on specific assumptions and organizing principles of knowledge and society according to which programmes and policies are being created and developed) (Mehta 2010).

DI conceptualises ideas both as interests and rational decision-making, which is in line with rational choice theory, and as values and appropriateness, such as in the cultural approach to institutions. On the one hand, *cognitive ideas* are practical guidelines for political action and represent a formalisation of the first two levels of ideas – policies and programmes. Cognitive ideas are expected to provide efficient solution to the problem and they are often based on scientific knowledge and rational explanations of the issue. On the other hand, *normative ideas* are based on values and aimed at legitimising policies and programmes by assessing their appropriateness.

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It is important to mention that, according to DI, institutions are not fixed formal structures, but are more open for debate (Peters 2012). Even though the formal structures are not excluded from analysis, they are secondary to the less structural forms of institutions. However, ideas and communication within institutions are not sufficient for institutional change to take place. Debates can be intensive and frequent; however, they can remain only what they are – debates (Peters 2012). Discursive Institutionalism aims at explaining why some discourses are more successful than others; or, why discourses are more successful in some countries and in other countries the same discourses fail. Therefore, this approach differentiates two spheres within which discourses are created and performed.

The *coordinative discourse* takes place in the sphere of policy and it has the role of coordinating ideas of political actors within the institutions regarding the policy. In the sphere of policy-making, *coordinative discourse* represents the way in which political actors create, elaborate and coordinate their action. Actors can have different roles in facilitating a change from being members of epistemic communities, to entrepreneurs and mediators. The other, *communicative discourse*, takes place in the sphere of politics, and its role is to communicate a coordinated idea to the public. This part of the framework has elements in common with the literature on agenda setting and framing, as the way an idea is communicated to the public can be crucial in securing legitimacy for a new policy. *Communicative discourse* is formalised between the policy sphere and the public sphere, and this type of discourse is the means that political actors use to present, deliberate and legitimise their ideas to the general public.

DI aims at exploring how political actors bring change to institutions. In creating and maintaining institutions, agents use their ability to make sense of the rational or ideational rules within a given setting, i.e. use their *background ideational abilities*. This concept had been previously elaborated by Bourdieu (1994), Habermas (1989) and Giddens (1984), who focused on how individuals create and develop ideas; they did not, however, analyse „the processes by which institutions change, which is a collective endeavor“ (Schmidt 2008: 315).

Therefore, Schmidt introduces a complementary concept of *foreground discursive abilities*, or the logic of communication which, as she explains „enables agents to think, speak and act outside their institutions even as they are inside them, to deliberate about institutional rules even as they use them, and to persuade one another to change those institutions or to maintain them“ (Schmidt 2008: 314). The concept of discursive abilities originates from the idea of communicative action (Habermas 1989, 1996) and the literature on discursive democracy (Dryzek 2000), which focused on breaking the monopoly of elites in national and supranational decision-making, and on ensuring wider access to the decision-making process (Schmidt 2008: 315).

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It is important to associate the studied discourse with specific political actors, since, in Berman's words, „ideas do not have any impact by themselves, as disembodied entities floating around in a polity“ (Berman 1998: 21). According to DI, the position of power in formal institutions is not necessary for the actors in order to bring change successfully. Instead, it is the strength of their arguments and the convincing communication of their ideas that empower the actors (Schmidt 2011b: 59; Peters 2012). Therefore, a discourse should be assessed with respect to coherency and consistency of its ideas, and the strength of its cognitive and normative arguments. The relevance of the ideas should be explored, as well as the timing and viability of policy solutions. The ideas can also be assessed regarding their appropriateness in terms of national values, tradition and culture (Schmidt 2008; Metha 2010). The analysis can explore whether the discourse reached consensus on relevant issues, as this can increase its transformative potential (Peters 2012: 158).

### Methodological Limitations

According to Discursive Institutionalism, institutional change is possible every time when the actors in discourse voice their ideas and upset the equilibrium within an institution. A 'good institution', according to DI,

is open to new ideas, flexible and adaptable: „if discourse is good, than more discourse is better“ (Peters 2012: 156). Moreover, there is a type of institutional change within this theoretical approach named as *bricoleur* (Peterson 2012), when the policy solution is not based on an entirely new approach to the contested issue; instead, the existing ideas in the debate are combined and transformed into a decision. What is important in both cases, according to Peters, is that members of institutions with diverse and opposing views find a common ground. Identifying the common denominator increases the transformative potential of discourse and makes it more possible to bring change to the existing policy.

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However, DI lacks a comprehensive explanation of the process of institutional change (Lowndes 2013; Peters 2012). The theory needs further improvement regarding the explanation of causality in institutional change: how change occurs exactly, under what circumstances and when the outcome can be expected. According to Sheri Berman, these methodological challenges are due to the nature of ideas which are „vague, amorphous and constantly evolving [...] and never surrendered easily to empirical study or quantification“ (1998: 16). Berman also points out that all ideational theories face the same obstacle when it comes to their testing against the real-world environment: it is the difficulty to conceptualise ideas in such a way that they can be observed as „purely“ independent variables, separate from other influences in a given context and that their impact on political behaviour can be measured (Berman 1998: 15).

Moreover, Peters argues that DI defines an institution so widely and loosely that the institution cannot be clearly delineated from its environment. If anyone can join an institution, if there are no exogenous principles of hierarchy and organisations, then anything can constitute an institution, regardless of its organisation, level of formalisation and membership. Moreover, if ideas are inherent to individuals, and institutions are contingent for the communication of ideas by individuals, it is difficult to analyse or assess these elements separately. Due to these shortcomings, DI does not enable the formulation of a hypothesis which could be empirically tested with high degree of accuracy and reliability (Peters 2012: 154).

In order to overcome these limitations, an ideational theorist, according to Berman, should aim at examining „how different conditions enable certain ideas to take on a life of their own, influencing political behavior over an extended period of time. If this can be done [...] then the fact that its development was influenced by other factors is an analytically distinct subject that is only indirectly related to the ultimate outcomes being

explained“ (Berman 1998: 18). An increasing number of studies have been conducted with the aim of exploring the causal relationship between ideas and institutional change by using this ideational theory. For example, Sheri Berman used a process-tracing method to explore ideas which led to different policy solutions (Berman 2010, 1998); Vivien Schmidt observed matched pairs of country cases in which the impact of discourse on welfare adjustment was assessed, while other variables were controlled (Schmidt 2002).

Moreover, other studies observed the impact of discourse on political action through analysis of the speeches and debates of the political elites (Wincott 2011; Rich 2010; Dobbin 1994; Art 2006). A suitable method for measuring the impact of communicative discourse includes opinion polls and surveys, while coordinative discourse can be assessed through interviews and network analysis. This body of literature suggests that DI framework is being increasingly adapted in order to facilitate empirical studies of the causal relationship between ideas and political action. As Peters argues (2012), DI is an innovative approach aimed at introducing a substantially different conceptualisation of an institution. The innovative element of DI is the flexible and less structural conceptualisation of an institution. Therefore, Peters points out, it is important not to wrongly assess the new understanding of the concept by the old rules.

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## Conclusions

This paper outlines the relevant aspects of institutional theory in social sciences and gives a more detailed overview of the New Institutionalism approaches. Moreover, the paper explores Discursive Institutionalism, one of the newest theoretical approaches to institutions, and discusses its application in empirical research. In sum, basic assumptions of Discursive Institutionalism is that debates concerning fundamentally important issues in a society have a potential to significantly influence institutional change in relevant areas. DI focuses primarily on the role of ideas in political processes and understands ideas as a constitutive part of the concept of discourse. DI also takes into consideration the role of individuals in the process of institutional change and views political actors as being conceptually intrinsic to the institutions within which and about which they think, act and talk. The concept of an institution within DI, as both a process and structure, as flexible and contingent, offers better insight into public debates related to contested political and social issues. Lastly, DI shares the multi-theoretical character of New

Institutionalism and includes a wide range of methodological approaches. Limitations of DI include the one common to other ideational theories, which is the lack of ability to conceptualise ideas in such a way that their nature and impact on political behaviour is suitable for empirical analysis. Therefore, DI lacks a comprehensive explanation of the causal mechanism concerning the transformation of ideas in public debates into public policy. What makes DI relevant, however, is its potential to develop in the future a more dynamic explanation of institutional change than other institutionalist approaches can offer.

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### Marija Zurnić

#### Diskurzivni institucionalizam i institucionalne promene

##### Apstrakt

Rad razmatra najvažnije aspekte institucionalne teorije u društvenim naukama i detaljnije obrazlaže pristupe u okviru Novog institucionalizma. Osim toga, rad istražuje osnovne pretpostavke diskurzivnog institucionalizma, najnovijeg teorijskog pristupa institucijama, i razmatra primenu ove teorije u empirijskim istraživanjima. Cilj rada je da približi ovaj inovativni teorijski okvir akademskoj zajednici i stručnjacima, koji su zainteresovani za istraživanje javnih debata u interakciji sa institucijama.

**Ključne reči:** teorija institucionalizma, diskurzivni institucionalizam, Vivien Smit