The Institutional Approach

Introduction

The second of the three approaches to party behaviour explored in this book is the institutional approach. This approach uses political institutions and the political environment to explain party choices. In the context of compulsory quotas such as parity, this approach can be used to explore how the quota legislation itself, along with other aspects of the political system, can influence and define the choices available to parties. In so doing, it is possible to illustrate the choice set available to parties. Some parties may find themselves with a range of options, in which case the institutional approach will need to be used in conjunction with other approaches to explain how parties prioritise between the available choices. But in certain circumstances, institutional constraints may be so great that parties may find themselves with no choice at all when it comes to quota implementation. In these cases, it can be argued that the external political environment is of greater significance than other predictors of party behaviour such as electoral or ideological motivations, as the choice of which course of action to take is effectively taken out of a party’s hands. This chapter will explore the institutional approach before looking at various institutions to illustrate how each will affect the choice set available to parties when deciding whether or not to implement parity.

The institutional approach is predicated on the belief that party motivations and behaviour are fundamentally influenced by the external institutional environment. Party choices are shaped and defined by the political environment in which they are located. Parties cannot be considered as free agents operating on a blank canvas, but rather as players within a game. As such, the motivations of each player can
only be understood within the context of the rules of the game. In the game of politics, these ‘rules’ are the collective impact of the institutional framework. Every aspect of French political life will help to define the parameters within which parties operate, and to limit the choices that are available to parties. Institutionalists believe that it is the institutional environment, more than anything else, which determines party behaviour. This is used to explain the difference between political systems in different countries.

In keeping with the overarching themes of the book, this chapter uses a rational choice version of institutionalism to demonstrate how parties seek to maximise their utility within the changing institutional environment. If this approach is a good predictor of party behaviour, then it should be possible to identify ways in which institutions shape party motivations and control the choices available to parties. It should also be possible to observe changes in party behaviour in response to changes in the institutional environment. If parties are attempting to play the game of politics to their best advantage, then they should be sensitive to any changes in the rules of the game and adapt their game-play accordingly. For example, the same parties might adopt different strategies under different electoral systems. Similarly, parties might change their strategies in response to the introduction of the parity law, in a way that was moulded by the nature of the law and its contribution to the wider institutional setting. Institutions may also have a variable impact on different parties depending on each party’s resources and goals. In some instances, institutions might be able to explain variation in parity’s implementation from one party to the next; in other instances, they might be able to provide a partial explanation that is rendered more complete when considered in conjunction with other factors, which is the theme of Chapter 7.

The aim of this chapter is to explore the institutional approach in greater detail, and then to test the approach by seeing how useful it is for explaining party behaviour in France. Although there is debate as to the boundaries of what can be considered an ‘institution’, with new institutionalists using a somewhat broader definition of institutions than their predecessors, this chapter shall focus on political institutions that have a direct bearing on candidate selection, such as the electoral system, the party system, the relative importance of the office at stake, and the resources at the disposal of the various parties. The exact detail of the parity law will also be considered to see how this interacts with France’s other political institutions to influence party