Political Institutions and Political Stability

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In some of the eighteen European democracies analysed in Berg-Schlosser and Mitchell (2000) the political institutions such as legislatures, executives and party systems, responded to – and contained – the economic crisis of the late 1920s and early 1930s; in others they failed. In either case the crisis of European democracies between 1919 and 1939 was also a crisis of institutions, most obviously where democratic institutions were replaced by non-democratic ones. But is there any general relationship between the structure of political institutions and the stability of democracy, where stability refers, minimally, to the survival of democratic institutions? And how are we to define political institutions?

By political institutions we mean the structures within a polity that enable it to function, the ways in which power is exercised and constrained, the mechanisms through which decisions are made. Of course such institutions are located within, and derive from, a particular society and culture, but they also define a structure of opportunities and potential rewards for individuals and groups. So ‘at the core [political institutions] are the rules of the game’ and in contemporary nation states these rules are formalized in written constitutions (Rothstein 1996: 145; see also Apter 1996: 374–9 and 386–9). All the European polities that emerged immediately after 1918–19 adopted new constitutions to establish the rules of their ‘political game’, as did some of the older systems who rewrote their existing constitutions – Greece in 1923 and Romania in 1918.

For any given political system a constitution defines political institutions and the relationships between them (see Goodin 1996 for other aspects of institutional design). The writing of a constitution usually results from elite discussion and action; its adoption needs the widespread consent of those who make up the political community. This creation of political institutions is often a first stage in a more general transition to democracy. But as political institutions are created before the process of democratization is complete there may be a gap between constitutional design and political practice, between the ‘formal’ constitution and the informal or ‘material’
one (see Sartori 1997: 122). The existence of this gap also provides opportunities for political actors and groups, and its extent can be an indication of the commitment of elites to democracy. It may also reflect ambiguities of form and practice, as ‘negotiation and compromise among elites were at the heart of the democratization process’ (Huntington 1991: 165). Huntington goes on to suggest that there is a democratic bargain underlying the process of democratization, a ‘trade-off between participation and moderation’ (Huntington 1991: 169). The upholding of this bargain underlies the continuance of democracy, and this in turn depends on the constraints exercised by civil society, and the continuing commitment of elites to the democratic condition as well as the continued successful functioning of the political institutions that have been created.

Huntington identified three major waves of democratization, and so of institution creation, in the modern state system. The first from 1828 to 1926, the second from 1943 to 1962 and the third from 1974 onwards. Between these periods he locates two ‘reverse’ waves of de-democratization – the first from 1922 to 1942 and the second from 1958 to 1975.

In Huntington’s periodization there is an overlap between the first wave of democratization and the first reverse wave of de-democratization; it is this period just after the end of the First World War that saw the emergence of several new polities in Europe. Indeed we can make a distinction between those countries that emerged from the redrawing of nation-state boundaries following the break-up of the European empires after 1918–19 and others that pre-date these changes. This first reverse wave includes some of the ‘new’ European nation states as well as some of the older polities. The ‘age’ of a political system, and with it the presumed embedding of political institutions, was no guarantee of its survival in interwar Europe, although Huntington does suggest that ‘only one country, Greece, of the countries that introduced democratic institutions before 1900 suffered a reversal after 1920’ (Huntington 1991: 17).

When we take the ‘age’ of a democracy, as measured by its existence before the First World War, the evidence shows that Greece was not the only ‘old’ system in which political institutions failed to survive the interwar crisis. Portugal, Italy, Spain and Romania also experienced transitions to an authoritarian regime in this period (although we might express some doubts about their democratic credentials before 1914). We should note, too, that apart from the ‘new’ polities several other systems also changed their constitution in this period, for example Spain in 1931 (see Table 8.1).

For those who designed new sets of political institutions after 1918–19 there were already established examples of constitution-making and they could draw on past practice and experience. But what models guided the design of constitutions and political institutions for the ‘new’ states following the First World War? Essentially there were two – parliamentarianism and presidentialism – although, as Sartori reminds us, neither of these