

Department of Political Science Political Institutions Field Statement

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Political Institutions is not defined by particular substantive interests, and so is quite unlike the fields of American Politics, Comparative Politics, and International Relations. Instead, it is an explicitly theoretical field, of relevance to all students who want to understand the array of institutions—from bureaucracies, legislatures, and courts to political parties and interest groups to social norms and reputations—that are so central to an understanding of politics in any country, anywhere, or any system of countries. It is about the origins of institutions, including democracy, markets, freedom and human rights. In this field, we study both the origins of these institutions as well as their stability and change over time. The field highlights the vast consequences of institutions for policy and people. And in shedding light on these things, it is broadly eclectic in approach, bringing to bear the most influential and current developments in institutional theory in economics, sociology, and psychology as well as political science.

To our knowledge, Stanford is the only major department in the country to offer a field that is entirely devoted to institutional theory, and in-coming students clearly find this a real attraction. It is something that makes Stanford unique. It is also our comparative advantage as a university, for Stanford as a whole can offer students the best group of institutional theorists in the entire world. Scholars in the business school, economics, sociology, political science, the law school, and the Hoover Institution provide an awesome cast of thinkers and innovators who have played seminal roles in giving direction to modern institutional theory.

Students in this field are required to take a three-course sequence prior to taking the comprehensive exam. Often, but not necessarily, these courses are taken in the following order. Theories of Political Institutions (PS 364), usually offered in the winter quarter, provides an overview of theories and approaches. The New Economics of Organization (PS 362), usually offered in the spring quarter, provides an in-depth survey of rational choice theories of institutions. And Theories of Organizational Decision Making (PS 365), usually offered in the fall quarter, provides an in-depth treatment of behavioral theories of organization, and deals with models of bounded rationality and theories and studies from cognitive psychology and behavioral economics. In addition to these three courses, students are encouraged to take the Political Economy sequence from the business school, and to pursue other institutional courses outside the department—from scholars like Mark Granovetter in sociology or Avner Greif in economics.