

## Welcome to the Jungle: Policy Theory and Political Instability

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Environmental politics is fundamentally about social change—in values, behaviors, patterns of economic activity and, crucially, in political institutions. The transformative aspirations of environmental politics are part of what makes this such an exciting arena for students and social reformers alike and a fertile opportunity for pairing the substantive concerns of environmental studies with the analytic tools of comparative political inquiry.

A crucial part of this social transformation is policy change, including the creation and reform of environmental laws, regulations, agencies, and government programs. Environmental problems are often the result of market failures and collective action problems, and their resolution typically requires confronting powerful economic interests. As a result, it is no exaggeration to say that changes in government policy are a prerequisite for large-scale improvement in environmental conditions (see Barry and Eckersley 2005; Steinberg 2005). With policy change figuring prominently on the agendas of environmental movements throughout the world (Dalton, Recchia, and Rohrschneider 2003), it comes as little surprise that the canonical studies of policy change in industrialized democracies draw heavily on environmental cases (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Kingdon 1984; Sabatier 1988; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993; Downs 1972).

Yet when we look more closely at the meaning of policy change, and that of institutional change generally, it becomes clear that the concept of “change” refers simultaneously to two quite distinct phenomena. First, change entails moving away from a previous arrangement deemed by reformers to be unsatisfactory. In the context of environmental policy, this move typically requires passing new laws and creating new bureaucratic structures for the control of industrial pollution and the provision of goods ranging from drinking water to national parks. Second, the new arrangement must endure. Endurance is central to the very meaning of institutions, described by Hughes as “relative permanence of a distinctly social sort” (Hughes 1936, 180, as cited in Clemens and Cook 1999). Or as March and Olsen put it, “An institution is a relatively enduring collection of rules and organized practices,

embedded in structures of meaning and resources that are relatively invariant in the face of turnover of individuals and relatively resilient to the idiosyncratic preferences and expectations of individuals and changing external circumstances” (2006, 3). Institutional rules create the order and predictability necessary for collective action (Ostrom 1999). Institutional reform, in turn, is designed to project a new pattern of social interaction into the future, to preserve a moment of political creativity for posterity. The proper metaphor for institutional change is that of switching tracks, not continuous reversals in course. Captured in terms like “lasting change,” “a permanent shift,” and “the revolutionary legacy,” these two dimensions of the process of institutional change—switching and sticking—suggest two distinct categories of causal mechanisms that together are necessary conditions for meaningful reforms in public policies and other state institutions.

This chapter focuses on the second dimension of this challenge—the long-term stability of reforms in government institutions, particularly in developing and post-communist countries.<sup>1</sup> Research on institutional stability gained an unfortunate reputation in an earlier generation of comparative politics research, as it often focused on the durability of regimes irrespective of their commitment to human rights (see, e.g., Huntington 1965; for a critique of stability studies, see Jourde 2007, 487–489). Authoritarian regimes commonly invoke stability as justification for their rule, while global powers have often used the rhetoric of stability as a rationale for supporting dictators to their liking. Following global trends toward democratization, however, institutional stability has received renewed attention as a legitimate focus of comparative politics research on topics such as the survival of fragile new democracies and the long-term consolidation of institutional reforms (Schedler 1998).

As part of a larger research agenda on comparative environmental politics, institutional stability merits closer attention for at least three reasons. First, major reforms in public policy—be it the development of a modern welfare state, the overhaul of a nation’s health-care system, or the establishment of an effective air quality management system—take place over a period of decades (Meadowcroft 2005). This time is required for experimentation and learning on the part of policy reformers and for the creation of social constituencies in support of the new institutions. Meaningful policy reform cannot be achieved in a context of perpetual turnover in programs, personnel, and practices. Second, institutional continuity is vital for environmental governance in particular, given the potential for irreversible harm (notably species extinction and the destruction of ecosystems) and in light of the long time horizons required for sound management of resources like forests, fisheries, and watersheds (Steinberg 2009).

Third, the durability of institutional arrangements is important because it stands in stark contrast to the institutional instability characteristic of most of the world’s

nations, which are subject to frequent regime changes, runaway inflation, military coups and countercoups, constitutional crises, ethnic clashes, guerrilla warfare, breakaway republics, booms and busts in export revenues, budgetary crises, corruption scandals, electoral fraud, crackdowns on civil liberties, and heightened vulnerability to natural disasters, among other disruptive forces. I call these *stochastic* political systems, employing the term normally used to describe statistical variance to emphasize how inhospitable these political environments can be for the consolidation of policy reforms.

For those readers who have spent their lives in stable industrialized democracies, it may be difficult to appreciate either the pervasiveness or the everyday ramifications of social instability in most of the world's nations. The consequences of this instability for environmental institutions are often profound. In the course of hundreds of interviews with environmental policy reformers from a wide range of developing countries over the past fifteen years, I have encountered innumerable instances in which promising new environmental policies have been swept aside, time and again, with each change in political administration. In Ecuador, where an environmental agency was established in 1996, Environment Minister Yolanda Kakabadse led a successful effort to attract international funds and to increase coordination with the agriculture and energy sectors on issues like climate change and biodiversity—until, two years into her tenure, her government was ousted in a military coup. In Bolivia, conservationists pioneered the use of national environmental endowments, an innovative institutional arrangement designed to “dampen funding oscillations” associated with government sources (Quintela 2003, 15). After raising upward of 100 million dollars from international donors, the Bolivian fund was dismembered following the 1993 presidential election.

A similar phenomenon can be observed in a wide range of countries. Michael Ross documents how, during the post–World War II period, the Philippines established an exemplary forestry agency “with a well-trained staff, a considerable degree of political independence, a policy of promoting sustained-yield forestry, and a reputation for avoiding the corruption and patronage that plagued many other government agencies” (2001, 54). In the mid-1950s, however, fluctuation in timber exports destroyed the agency, making it the target of political leaders seeking access to surging revenues. In Bulgaria, in the wake of the transition from Soviet rule, Baker and Baumgartl (1998, 194) cite “instability at the apex of government, in particular at the ministerial level, making it difficult to ensure policy continuity.” In an analysis of sustainable forestry and antipollution initiatives in Argentina, Espach concludes that “feckless and unstable state agencies have created an institutional environment unfavorable even for private initiatives aimed at bypassing government interference” (2005, 1). In Brazil, Hochstetler and Keck report, “As new chief executives (at federal or state levels) seek to put their stamp on government, they move

environmental agencies from one jurisdiction to another, change their attributions, create new departments, and eliminate others. When frequent reshuffling occurs, it becomes almost as surprising when there is policy continuity as when there is not” (2007, 224). In Nepal, Heinen and Shrestha report (2006, 51) that the political upheaval of the past decade has brought conservation policy reforms to a standstill. Foreign tourism is notoriously susceptible to political and economic instability (Clements and Georgiou 1998), and in Eastern Africa, events such as the 1998 embassy bombings and widespread civil unrest in Kenya in 2007 caused the collapse of tourist-based conservation projects throughout the region.<sup>2</sup>

How can one create effective environmental institutions in political systems characterized by pervasive instability? This is the central question of this chapter, and I argue that it should occupy a more central place in our thinking about the prospects for effective environment governance around the globe. Institutional stability has been largely overlooked in comparative research on environmental policy making, which has focused almost exclusively on stable industrialized democracies, mirroring the geographic bias of policy studies generally. Representative journals such as *Policy Sciences*, *Policy Studies Review*, and the *Policy Studies Journal* are strongly oriented toward the United States in particular, building theories of policy change on the experiential basis of a country with a degree of political stability that is almost unparalleled by world standards. If we wish to expand our geographic horizons to include most of the world’s political systems—and in order to remain relevant, policy research must do precisely this—then the durability of reforms can no longer be taken for granted.

The long-term fate of policy reforms in chaotic institutional environments raises important questions for the study of comparative politics. When political regimes change, do regulatory arrangements change in kind? How resilient are institutions vis-à-vis shifts in social conditions? We know, on the one hand, that the institutional impacts of political and economic change can be profound. Yet surely not every coup or crisis reorders the institutional landscape from scratch. What changes and what endures? What is the relation between political form and function? This topic also carries important ramifications for the study and practice of global environmental politics. Institutions for global cooperation seek to protect biodiversity, stem damage to forests and oceans, and mitigate climate change over the next several decades. How can such tasks ever be accomplished without a greater understanding of the dynamics of policy reform and institution building in non-OECD countries, the site of most of the planet’s people, natural resources, and future economic growth? By examining the endurance of policies across regimes—governance across governments—we can gain insights into the social processes underlying successful reform efforts in a wider range of national settings and can better understand the microfoundations of institutional stability in unstable systems.

The argument proceeds in three parts. First, I situate this investigation in the existing literature on policy change and institutional stability. I argue that external shocks—the very factors identified in the literature as major drivers of policy change in stable industrialized democracies—can have the opposite effect when present in excess, inhibiting policy change by preventing the consolidation of reforms. Next, I document major sources of instability in stochastic political systems, drawing together a number of quantitative indicators and historical illustrations. The remainder of the discussion focuses on mechanisms of endurance. Cognizant of their tenuous hold on power, policy reformers in stochastic political systems have at their disposal a number of strategies for increasing the odds that reforms will last. This section draws on ongoing field research in Costa Rica and Bolivia, on interviews with environmental policy practitioners from fifteen developing countries conducted between 2001 and 2003, and on insights and case material from the literatures on regime change, democratization, comparative public administration, and environmental policy. I conclude by considering the implications of this line of inquiry for the study and practice of environmental governance, and for broader efforts to join the fields of environmental policy and comparative politics.

### Conceptualizing Policy Change

Under what conditions do countries adopt policies conducive to environmental protection? This question occupies a central place in the global environmental politics literature and is often tied to questions regarding support for international environmental regimes and compliance with treaty commitments (Sprinz and Vaahantoranta 1994; Mitchell 1994; Haas 1990). As argued in chapter 1, this work would benefit from more thorough engagement with research on domestic policy processes, which comprises an impressive and diverse body of literature.<sup>3</sup> In reviewing theories of policy change, Lowry (2006, 314) notes that “most dominant causal explanations of significant policy change over time involve unplanned factors arising from outside the policy system.”<sup>4</sup> The seminal works on policy change—notably research by Sabatier (1988), Kingdon (1984), and Baumgartner and Jones (1993)—all report that these exogenous shocks are frequently the impetus behind major policy reforms. Sabatier’s advocacy coalition framework focuses on domestic policy subsystems (such as the subsystem governing air quality in a given locale) that are targets of advocacy by competing coalitions holding divergent policy beliefs. Sabatier concludes that events external to the policy subsystem—such as changes in socioeconomic conditions, in governing coalitions, and in decisions from other policy subsystems—are the primary drivers of major reforms (Sabatier 1988, 134). These external changes influence the policy subsystem either by changing the beliefs of its dominant coalition or by replacing one coalition with another.

The same conclusion emerges from Baumgartner and Jones's (1993) work on punctuated equilibrium theory. Focusing again on the United States, these authors argue that seemingly stable political arrangements dominating a policy area, such as iron triangles of interest groups and their congressional and bureaucratic allies, ultimately depend on the existence of powerful social institutions. Therefore macrolevel changes in social institutions—such as growth in the influence of NGOs, changes in the organization of legislative bodies, or shifts in federal power-sharing arrangements—can produce rapid and profound changes in policy. They find that large-scale external changes, such as the OPEC-induced energy crisis or the election of Ronald Reagan and his antiregulatory agenda, create the conditions for major policy shifts.

In what is probably the most influential book written on policymaking processes, John Kingdon (1984) likewise identifies large-scale social change as a dominant force driving policy reforms. Kingdon's model emphasizes the role of policy entrepreneurs who join together three distinct processes, or streams—the availability of policy solutions, the recognition of policy problems by decision makers, and windows of opportunity for change. Examples of windows of opportunity include the installation of a new administration, a new legislature or committee chair, or swings in national mood. Kingdon concludes that these windows, which appear briefly and with rarity in the American system, are the precipitating events for sweeping changes in public policies. Large-scale political change has played an equally important role in the reform of domestic environmental policies in Europe, as the expansion of EU regulatory authority has increased the influence of the “greener” member states through regulatory competition and policy diffusion (Vogel 2003; Andonova and VanDeveer, chapter 11, this volume).

In sum, large-scale changes in national conditions provide important opportunities for creative efforts to reform policy. But what about when there is “too much” change? In nations characterized by pervasive crises and perennial shifts in political power, one would expect that there exist ample opportunities for the initiation of new policy endeavors, but that these might not last beyond the next large-scale social disruption. That is, the very factors that in moderation promote policy change in industrialized democracies may, in excess, inhibit it in other societies. After all, exogenous shocks provide a window of opportunity for opponents of environmental regulation as well, such as the logging company eager to extract timber from a newly protected area, the factory forced to reduce toxic emissions, or the fishing fleet affected by catch limits. Even without actual reversals of policy, major political and economic developments can distract public attention to the extent that previous initiatives are underfunded or otherwise fall to the wayside (Downs 1972).

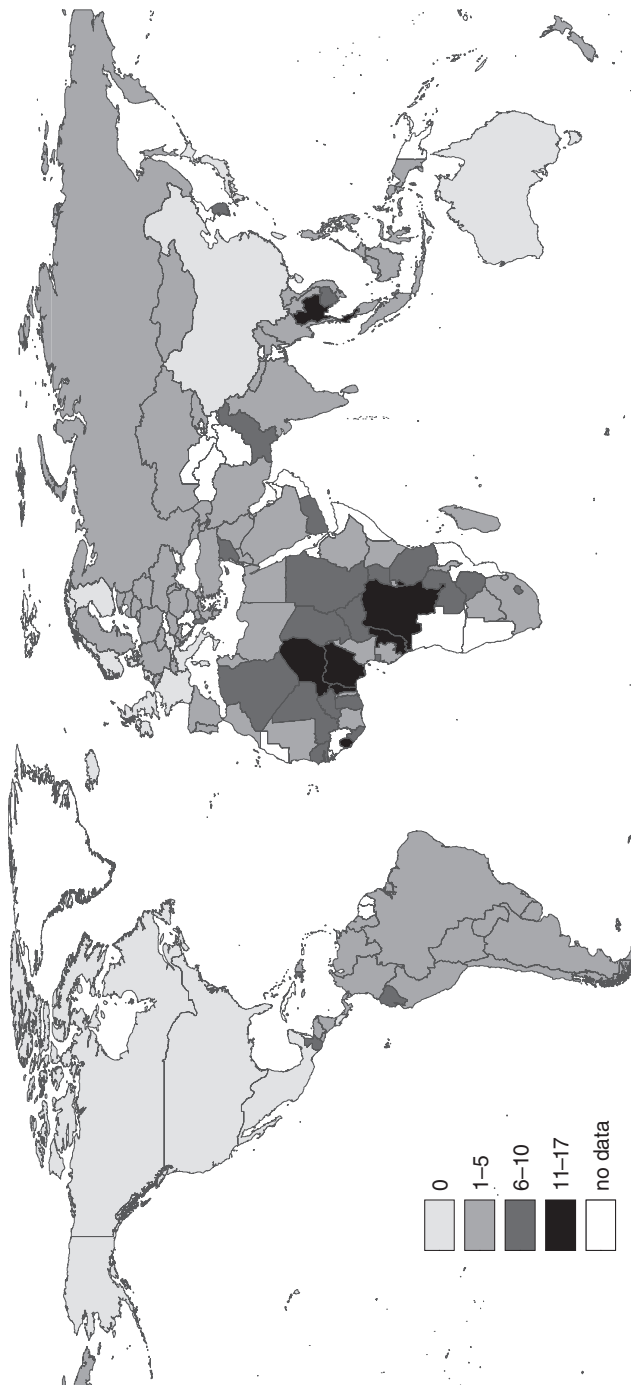
The challenge that pervasive social disruptions pose for the consolidation of policy reforms has been missed by researchers comparing the policy responsiveness

of industrialized democracies. Tsebelis (1995) among others compares presidential and parliamentary systems with respect to their ability to respond to new social challenges, weighing factors such as the impact of federalism and different configurations of party politics. By focusing exclusively on the initiation of policy reforms (such as the passage of laws) rather than their long-term consolidation, this literature fails to distinguish between the switching and sticking dimensions of policy change. The implementation of policy is no trivial matter even in established industrialized democracies (see Patashnik 2008). But in these countries, significant policy reforms are accompanied by a process of institutionalization associated with a modern professional bureaucracy. New environmental laws and regulatory bodies soon constitute a force to be reckoned with, bolstering the case against future reversals by documenting environmental and health conditions and by producing visible improvements in environmental quality and public services. This situation stands in sharp contrast to the prevailing conditions in stochastic political systems, where there are ample opportunities to initiate policy, but these new innovations are easily overturned. Often the result is “policy churn,” described by O’Toole and Meier (2003, 47) as “the adoption of frequently changing reforms without leaving sufficient time for implementation.”

### Sources of Instability

From 1970 to 2009, there were 182 successful military coups around the world. From 1946 to 2003, 229 armed conflicts, mostly internal, took place in 148 countries. From 1970 to 2006, thirty-nine countries experienced triple-digit annual inflation in consumer prices for more than one year. Between 1951 and 1990, the average lifespan of a democracy was eighteen years for countries with per capita income between \$1,001 and \$3,000 and six years for those under \$1,000. Within the past seventy-five years—roughly the lifespan of a macaw—there have been changes in constitutional regimes in all of Latin America, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, and almost all of Europe. In the entire world, only five countries with populations over a million (Canada, Australia, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States) have constitutional regimes that have lasted for a century—roughly the time required for a clear-cut forest to recover minimal ecological functions.<sup>5</sup>

Political change is clearly endemic to modern society and is indeed a necessary condition for human betterment. But in many countries, political turnover has reached epidemic proportions. The data in figure 10.1 confirm the widely appreciated point that political instability is spread unevenly throughout the world. This figure, based on data from the Cross-National Time Series Data Archive, shows only the most extreme type of political change—the adoption of a new national



**Figure 10.1**  
Constitutional changes, 1960–2003



constitution. Although some leaders may adopt a new constitution for ceremonial purposes with little impact on the existing political order, these data are broadly representative of the frequency of significant shifts in the rules of the political game. Constitutions, as the rules for rule making, lay down fundamental precepts for political representation, civil-military relations, legal process, the distribution of power and resources between the central government and regions, civil liberties, relations among branches of government, and patterns of participation by ethnic, religious, and other social sectors.

What does sustainable forestry look like in a country that has experienced an average of one constitutional regime change per decade? Why should a factory owner take seriously air pollution regulations issued by a government agency unlikely to last through the next election or coup? As Deacon argues, “If the institutions of government are weak or short-lived, proposals for long-term investment in government-owned assets [such as national forests] will lack credibility since the segments of society making the initial sacrifice will have no guarantee of receiving the ultimate reward” (1994, 423). Quite apart from the regulatory uncertainty that results from frequent shifts among governments with competing policy priorities, the periods of transition from one regime to the next present serious challenges for any effort to govern effectively. Research on democratization has documented the notoriously unstable nature of transitional regimes—nascent democracies following periods of anarchy or authoritarian rule, or regimes that otherwise fall somewhere in between poles of democracy and authoritarianism (Goldstone et al. 2005).

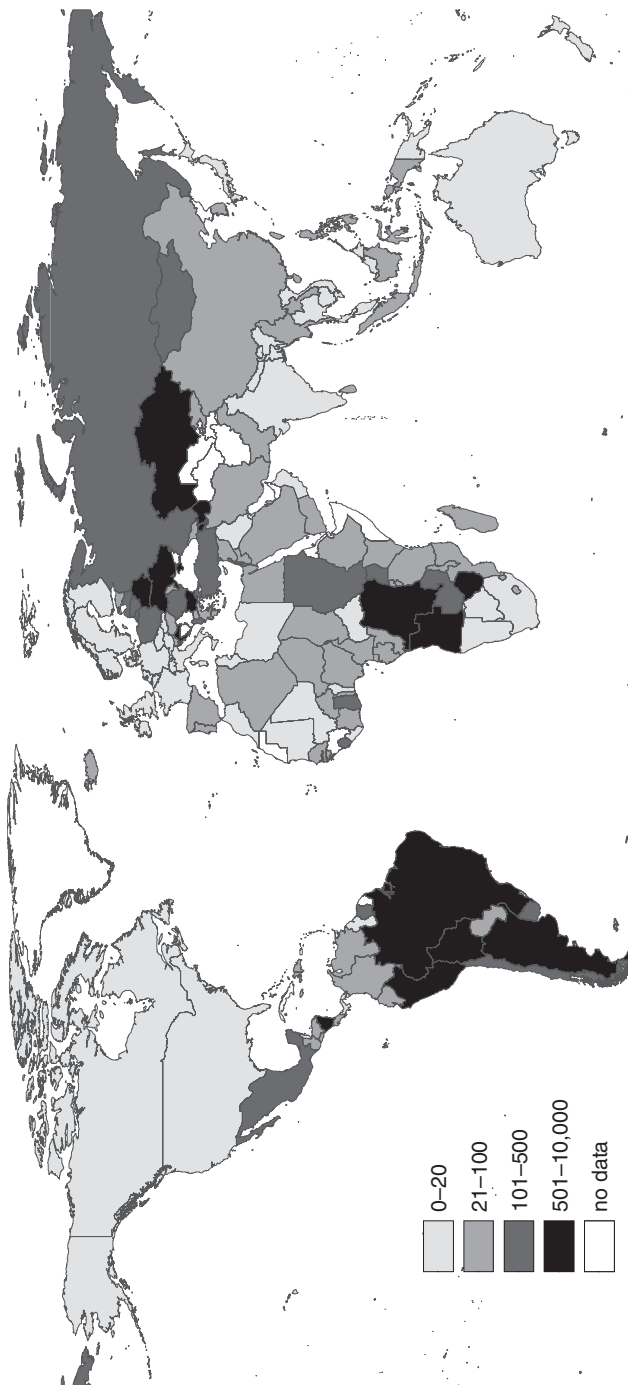
The comparative politics literature on these topics has focused almost exclusively on macrolevel considerations—operationalizing definitions of regime types, measuring trends in democratization and political stability, and offering theories to explain change at this level of analysis. This literature has paid considerably less attention to the implications of regime transitions for the day-to-day business of governance—a task described by scholars of postcommunist states as akin to “rebuilding the ship at sea” (Elster, Offe, and Preuss 1998). Deacon (1994) reports that political instability is empirically correlated with increases in deforestation, a finding consistent with research on the relationship between political stability and economic growth (Evans and Rauch 1999). In interviews with policy reformers in developing countries, I find that the institutional fluidity associated with regime change poses serious challenges for those trying to create effective environmental institutions. Energy policy makers in Mexico, for example, report that with the downfall of the single-party system dominated by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), it has become exceptionally difficult for federal policy makers to implement reforms on a national scale. Under the old regime, state governors followed presidential directives because this was a prerequisite for advancing their own political careers. In the post-PRI period, this incentive is no longer available, yet there is nothing to replace it, as a new system

governed by the impersonal rule of law and a functioning court system has yet to take shape. A similar phenomenon is reported by Stern and colleagues with respect to the postcommunist countries of Europe, where “old norms, rules, organizations, routines and other public sense-making structures have been abolished, compromised, or have otherwise abruptly lost their binding character before any alternative structures have settled” (2002, 527). The pains of regime transition are equally apparent in South Africa, where environmental officials report in interviews that the expulsion of experienced Afrikaners from the diplomatic corps, which accompanied the country’s transition to democracy, has denied South Africa the long-term interpersonal relationships with foreign diplomats that are often crucial for problem solving during international environmental negotiations.

The sources of institutional instability around the world are not limited to political transitions. Figure 10.2 shows national experiences with periods of extreme inflation, measured as the average of the three highest years of inflation in consumer prices reported by the International Monetary Fund’s International Financial Statistics database. Runaway inflation poses a direct threat to many environmental policies and practices. What are the prospects for sustainable agriculture, for example, under 500 percent annual inflation in food prices? These inflationary periods are also a source of political instability in regimes with a tenuous hold on power. Grindle and Thomas note: “In the absence of established systems and traditions, constitutional or other, reinforced by adherence over time, that regulate political competition and changes of power, the legitimacy of state actions is always open to dispute. Challenges to the right of regimes to remain in power can emerge easily” (1991, 57). Runaway inflation creates a social environment in which collective action for long-term goals is highly improbable. O’Donnell writes:

Anyone who has lived under these circumstances understands this is a harsh, nasty world . . . the longer and the deeper this crisis, and the less the confidence that the government will be able to solve it, the more rational it becomes for everyone to act: at highly disaggregated levels, especially in relation to state agencies that may solve or alleviate the consequences of the crisis for a given firm or sector; with extremely short time horizons; and with assumptions that everyone else will do the same. A gigantic—national level—prisoner’s dilemma holds. (1993, 1363)

Apart from inflation *per se*, price volatility places serious strains on environmental institutions in many developing countries, which are as a rule heavily dependent on natural resources for export revenues and concentrate on one or a small number of commodities, such as oil, coffee, timber, or minerals. The lack of diversification combined with the inherent volatility of natural resource commodity prices creates boom-and-bust cycles with significant negative impacts on budget cycles, capital investments, and exchange rates (Ross 2001).



**Figure 10.2**  
Inflation: highest three years, 1970–2006 (average)

Many of the same countries that have experienced chronic political turnover and economic instability have also been the sites of significant military conflicts. From 1946 to 2003, there were 112 wars, defined as conflicts with 1,000 battle deaths or more (Eriksson and Wallenstein 2004). In addition to the devastating human toll, a collateral victim of these conflicts are national parks and other protected areas, which are frequently used by refugee populations, guerrilla armies, and government forces during times of conflict and as a source of revenues for patronage during reconstruction. Donovan, de Jong, and Abe (2007, 2) report that more than 40 percent of the world's tropical forest area is located in countries plagued by violent conflict, where munitions and overharvesting take a toll on wildlife and habitats (Dudley et al. 2002; McNeely 2003). Policies that benefit rural peoples in areas such as agricultural extension, water access, and rural electrification suffer when government employees stay away because of imminent danger or their lack of regulatory authority in regions ruled by competing forces.

These three sources of instability—political, economic, and military—often reinforce one another, as military conflicts and economic crises increase the fragility of regimes, and unstable regimes are less capable of resolving crises. Compounding these challenges are two sources of policy instability that do not stem from macro-level changes, but are nonetheless significant factors in developing and postcommunist countries. The first is the discontinuity that results from foreign aid, which often constitutes a significant proportion of the budgets of environmental agencies in these countries. Trends in the donor world come and go, and the project orientation of international assistance impedes coordinated long-term planning and institutional consolidation. The expatriate experts who assume leadership positions in these projects typically have a residence time in the host country of about two or three years before moving on to a new project in another country. These experts constitute a large fraction of the top-level technical managers in many countries receiving environmental aid, so this turnover comes at a significant cost. Finally—and perhaps most important—in most countries, environmental policies and institutions are quite new and lack the long-standing constituencies and political weight of established ministries in agriculture, planning, and development. In periods of political and economic change, it is precisely the newer and less firmly established institutions that are most prone to collapse.

In sum, over much of the planet's surface, the public institutions governing environmental quality are in a state of near-constant flux. Having brought this broadly intuitive point to the analytic foreground, the question remains as to how, if at all, environmental governance can be achieved under these trying circumstances. My aim is not to paint a hopeless picture, but merely to revise some of the default assumptions undergirding comparative environmental policy research. By way of analogy, it was only after collective action theorists pointed out the

inherent difficulties of cooperation—changing our default assumption to one of noncooperation—that every instance of coordinated social action became a puzzle, a subject worthy of inquiry. Likewise, there are environmental policy successes in stochastic political systems, and these require explanation. Bolivia, for example, has emerged as a global leader in biodiversity conservation policy despite its history as one of the least politically stable countries in the world, having experienced well over one hundred changes of government since independence (Steinberg 2001). In Brazil, disparate environmental organizations that had maintained a low profile during military rule were united and animated during the transition to democracy, helping to draft the environmental chapter of the new national constitution in 1985–1988 (Hochstetler 1997). Regime transitions provided similar opportunities for environmental mobilization in East Asia (Lee and So 1999) and Central and Eastern Europe (see Andonova and VanDeveer, chapter 11, and Hochstetler, chapter 8, this volume).

This observation raises a larger point, namely that knowledge of the structural conditions shaping an action arena provides only a partial understanding of the dynamics of change. As David Dessler argues, we should think of structure not as a “container” but as a “medium” for action in light of the “capacities and liabilities of the agents who respond to those conditions of action” (1989, 467, 444). Making the most of constraints is the essence of entrepreneurship, including creative efforts at policy change undertaken by reformers with decades of political experience in a given country. Let us then consider in greater detail the puzzle and the possibility of establishing lasting environmental institutions in stochastic political systems.

### Sources of Durability in Stochastic Political Systems

The extent to which mainstream policy theory is detached from the conditions prevalent in most developing and postcommunist countries is apparent in the fact that “basic constitutional structure” appears, in Sabatier’s advocacy-coalition framework (Sabatier 1988, 132), within the category of “relatively stable” parameters affecting policy change (compare to figure 10.1). When the durability of political institutions is no longer the default assumption for theories of change, we encounter a very interesting and important question: what are the mechanisms at play that can account for institutional resilience in conditions of social stochasticity? Research on national policy styles shows that the characteristic manner of producing policy in a given country—construed along dimensions such as conflict resolution processes and the organization of scientific input—persists across administrations (Howlett 2002; Brickman, Jasanoff, and Ilgen 1985). But few studies have considered whether and under what conditions the actual substance of policy persists over the long term.<sup>6</sup>

Countervailing the sources of instability documented in the preceding section are a number of forces favoring policy continuity. Research on path dependence demonstrates that “established institutions generate powerful inducements that reinforce their own stability and further development” (Pierson 2000, 255). Richard Rose observes: “Policy makers are inheritors before they are choosers . . . new programs cannot be constructed on green field sites. Instead, they must be introduced into a policy environment dense with past commitments” (1993, 78). To the extent that environmental policies become embedded in organizational routines and provide benefits (such as drinking water, clean air, jobs, urban beautification, and recreational opportunities) that are valued by politically vocal members of society, it becomes more difficult to overturn them (Steinberg 2009). To understand why some policy reforms become part of the fabric of a society while others are discarded, we can draw on insights from historical institutionalism, specifically Kathleen Thelen’s emphasis on the “mechanisms of reproduction” that sustain an institution. As Thelen expresses the challenge, “We need to know exactly who is invested in particular institutional arrangements, exactly how that investment is sustained over time, and perhaps how those who were not invested in the institution are kept out” (1999, 391). Causal mechanisms can be understood as recurring complexes of cause-and-effect relationships found in wide range of social settings (see Tilly 2001). These mechanisms interact with other (sometimes countervailing) mechanisms in different combinations in different places and historical junctures. Thus, an emphasis on causal mechanisms allows cumulative, cross-national comparisons without requiring unrealistic assumptions of uniformity or determinism.

What are the mechanisms sustaining policy reforms in systems characterized by pervasive social instability? This is a large and unexplored topic, and my intention is to broach the question rather than settle it. Let us begin with the observation that policy reformers in stochastic political systems are acutely aware of the tenuous nature of their influence and frequently pursue strategies with this limitation in mind. In countries wracked by ongoing institutional upheaval, reformers can often be found attaching numerous tethers to their new policy initiatives, much like the owners of boats at dock do in anticipation of an approaching storm. Often the political storm makes a mockery of these attempts, tossing the institutional structure onto the rocky shoals. In other instances these efforts are successful, achieving a measure of consolidation over time. Here I consider three categories of tethering mechanisms: bureaucratic institutionalization, the role of nonstate actors, and the establishment of horizontal and vertical linkages outside the policy subsystem.

### **Bureaucratic Politics**

The concept of a modern Weberian bureaucracy, as a distinct organizational form oriented toward the provision of long-term public goods, is intimately tied with the

notion of stability (see O'Toole and Meier 2003). To the extent that public agencies approximate the Weberian ideal of professionalism and insulation from the whims of patronage politics, they can offer a measure of continuity across regimes, providing incoming rulers with information about a problem and with the competencies needed for effective governance. Even military rulers typically rely on civilian expertise to run most of a country's affairs, as military organizations are considerably more adept at capturing power than in actually governing. Environmental policies are invariably associated with bureaucratic structures such as national park systems, environment ministries, and new units devoted to climate change mitigation projects, water quality monitoring, and other functions. The fate of environmental bureaucracies across changes in regimes and political administrations thus serves as a logical point of departure for investigation into the potential sources of policy continuity in stochastic political systems.

For a policy reform to last, there must be at least a modicum of consistency in agency personnel. How much turnover occurs in agency personnel following changes in political administration? Turnover must be considered at three distinct levels: agency leaders and other high-level political appointees; midlevel professional managers (career civil servants in modern bureaucracies) who run much of the day-to-day business of an agency; and the front-line staff who are responsible for service delivery, often interacting directly with the public. Because heads of state typically rule for relatively short periods, continuity in agency staff is largely a function of the autonomy of the procedures governing civil service personnel selection and promotion. According to Meyer-Sahling, "The recent literature on politician-bureaucrat relations in Western democracies suggests that the politicization of personnel policy is widespread, that the modes, the degree and the depth of politicization differ across countries and time, and that the virtual absence of political intervention into civil service affairs, as in the United Kingdom, is an exception" (2008, 4). Although the notion of a truly autonomous bureaucratic personnel system may be more myth than reality, there are significant cross-national disparities. Meyer-Sahling observes that in Hungary, "by international standards, personnel turnover is very high . . . changes of government trigger almost a complete substitution of personnel in the senior ranks of the ministerial bureaucracy" (2008, 2). This finding is consistent with those for postcommunist countries generally, in which "the prevailing pattern in these states is still one of the top echelons of the civil service changing with each election, or, in worse cases, government reshuffles" (Verheijen and Robrenovic 2001, 441, cited in Meyer-Sahling 2008; see also Goetz 2001).

A number of East Asian countries benefit from highly professional bureaucracies that serve as a buffer against the effects of turnover and crisis. The role of state-led development in East Asia under the guidance of competent administrators under both authoritarian and democratic regimes has been widely documented (Haggard

2004; Evans and Rauch 1999). Elsewhere, however, bureaucracies provide at best a thin thread of continuity across administrations, as personnel turnover appears to often reach well into the ranks of middle-level managers. Grindle finds that “where patronage defines who is appointed to office, organizations are susceptible to rapid turnover of staff and their leaders are highly vulnerable to political changes” (1997, 483). Sloan reports that the predominance of personalistic rule and patronage-based appointments in Latin American bureaucracies results in high levels of turnover and job insecurity: “Hence, too many Latin American bureaucracies do not accumulate the institutional memories from trial and error experiences necessary to enlarge administrative capabilities required to perform the tasks and to improve efficiency in carrying out old functions” (1984, 141). (For a contrary example, see McAllister 2008; see also Klingner 1996.)

One unexplored dimension of bureaucratic stability concerns the fate of front-line agency staff during periods of instability and regime change. What becomes of the factory inspector or forestry official during times when it is unclear who is in charge, what the directives are, or even whether the government employee still has a job? Do front-line staff continue to perform their duties, even without pay, until things are put in order, or do they abandon their posts until the new boss arrives? We might expect uninterrupted fidelity to institutional roles when there is a strong sense of *esprit de corps* within an agency that is confident about its long-term prospects. Likewise, to the extent that employees have a normative commitment to the institutional mission or derive social status from their positions, we might expect them to act in a semi-official role during these transition periods. As Hecló observes, “History offers compelling examples of societies surviving through devastating cataclysms by virtue of ordinary people simply carrying on with appointed duties” (2006, 738). Future work on this topic could tap into research on the evolution of institutions in semilawless circumstances, such as Dudziak and Volpp’s (2006) analysis of the US-Mexico border during the transition to American rule in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

In stochastic political systems, state agencies often lack the professional autonomy needed to protect against policy reversals motivated by patronage, corruption, or whim. Cognizant of these threats, policy reformers use a variety of alternative tethering strategies to help their institutional creations to survive the coming political storms. Clark Gibson provides insight into the challenge of governance across governments in his study of the strategies used by conservation agency officials under one-party rule in Zambia:

Politics makes the exercise of public authority temporary. This uncertainty drives the creators of public agencies to choose institutional designs they would never select if pursuing administrative efficiency alone. Since political victory allows incumbents only temporary control over political authority, they attempt to protect their agency from their political opponents,



who could in the future gut or eliminate the agency. The fleeting nature of political control may even motivate incumbents to insulate the agency by hobbling their own exercise of public authority. (1999, 275)

Efforts to insulate institutions against future reversals of fortune are common in stable democracies (Moe 1990), but tethering strategies can reasonably be expected to proliferate in proportion to their proponents' perception of future threats of change. Looming instability, or even a tradition of instability, provides incentives to institutionalize. In studies of Mexico, Chile, and South Africa, Boylan observes that "where authoritarian elites fear the populism that may be endemic to new democracies and know that a regime change is imminent, they can be expected to create autonomous central banks to lock in a commitment to price stability over the long haul" (2001, 5). A similar strategy was deployed by the last British governor of Hong Kong, Christopher Patten, who pushed reforms to bolster the independent power of the legislature before ceding control to authoritarian China in 1997 (Husock 1998).

One tethering strategy entails the creation of a quasistate agency, an entity that has a government-sanctioned public function but enjoys considerable autonomy in its hiring and management practices and is less susceptible to manipulation by political leaders (see Bouckaert and Peters 2004). Quasistate agencies have proliferated in developing countries in recent decades, partly in response to concerns about patronage and corruption. But their autonomy comes at a cost. In addition to raising questions about public accountability, autonomy can compromise the effectiveness of an agency that has a transformative mission requiring it to confront powerful entrenched interests—a task that requires high-level political support. The designers of Costa Rica's environment ministry debated this issue at length in the 1980s, ultimately deciding that only a cabinet-level government agency would have the political clout needed to take on traditional ministries focused on resource extraction and development (Steinberg 2001). Other strategies include institutional designs such as Bolivia's forestry superintendency, created as part of the country's innovative forestry law reforms of 1996. To reduce the risk of political manipulation, the superintendent is nominated by the Senate and approved by the president. To promote policy consistency over time, the superintendent's appointment lasts for six years, spanning two four-year political administrations. Yet another tethering strategy can be found in environmental trust funds, which have been created in numerous developing and post-communist countries to "provide sustained funding, mitigating risks of unexpected stoppage of funds due to political changes, budget cuts, economic austerity programs, etc." (Conservation Finance Alliance 2003).

### Nonstate Actors

The creation and implementation of environmental policy depends heavily on non-state actors, from university scientists to investigative journalists, public interest law

firms, organic farmers, professional associations, and grassroots advocacy groups. These nonstate actors can serve as an important source of policy continuity in stochastic political systems. At the broadest level, an important mechanism for durability is the rise of a policy culture—an enduring set of social expectations concerning government action in a particular issue area (Steinberg 2001, 153–191). With the rise of environmental movements in many non-Western countries and associated efforts to raise public awareness and reform state institutions, political leaders of all stripes are increasingly expected to address environmental issues (see, e.g., Lee and So 1999). In the Philippines, for instance, an alliance of environmental NGOs sponsors the Green Electoral Initiative, surveying politicians on their environmental views and practices and publishing their relative rankings in voter guides. When broad swaths of society desire and eventually expect government action on certain issues, it is less likely that policies affecting those issues will be cast aside as a consequence of political change. Where there exists a strong environmental policy culture, it is also more likely that political leaders have been exposed to environmental ideas through mass media, school curricula, peer groups, and civil society organizations.

The consolidation of policy reforms is a long-term undertaking, and therefore the success of reform efforts depends on the long-term presence of legal reformers who can doggedly pursue a cumulative effort across projects and across administrations. But where do reformers go after their political party or government is removed from power? An institutional landscape composed of diverse nonstate actors devoted to environmental goals allows reformers to stay involved over the long haul, as these organizations provide employment, networking opportunities, and venues for sustained intellectual creation, discussion of proposals, and even policy influence during periods when political shifts prevent reformers' direct participation in government.

Environmental NGOs often promote policy continuity across administrations through their continued advocacy, over many years, of a coherent set of policy ideas. The 1998 Global Environmental Organizations Survey, which polled 248 organizations in 59 countries, found that environmental groups routinely interact with government officials (Dalton, Recchia, and Rohrschneider 2003). The institutional memory provided by nongovernmental organizations with respect to environmental laws (many of which they helped to design) is important because the judicial system is often deficient in this regard. In many developing countries, it is common for judges and law enforcement officials to be unfamiliar with the environmental laws on the books. Environmental NGOs such as CEDARENA in Costa Rica have produced compendia of laws and have provided formal training to judges, police, and even newly installed legislators and cabinet members. In many countries, NGOs have government-sanctioned roles in managing national parks, monitoring pollu-

tion, and working with local communities on projects related to coastal management and community forestry (Steinberg 2005). These groups may approach newly installed political leaders and agency officials to bring them up to speed on long-standing efforts, advocating continued financial and political support, and offering their technical services.

Public employee unions and professional societies, whose members constitute the technical staff of government agencies, provide another potential source of continuity across regimes and administrations, especially when they share a common set of normative commitments and management outlooks associated with their professions (see Haas 1990). Economic constituencies can likewise provide a thread of continuity across administrations. Policies that provide income streams to those who protect natural resources—through ecotourism, community forestry, organic agriculture standards, or payment for protection of watersheds—create not only economic incentives for sustainable behavior but political incentives to voice objections to any attempts to overturn these policies (Steinberg 2009).

Another mechanism of endurance in stochastic political systems is the existence of alliances among environmental reformers affiliated with a spectrum of political parties. When one or another party is installed in power, informal networks among environmentalists can help ensure that members of the network provide a consistent source of advocacy for given policies and programs across successive administrations. These alliances have proven to be an important source of continuity in Costa Rica, where bargains have been struck among prospective environment ministers in the country's two major political parties in advance of an election to ensure collaboration regardless of the outcome. Boards of directors of environmental NGOs in Costa Rica and quasi-state organizations (such as the National Biodiversity Institute) are often explicitly multipartisan in their composition to bolster the organizations' long-term prospects. In contrast, Guatemalan policy reformers attempting to create the institutional architecture for climate change mitigation projects report that in the absence of a broad consensus on environmental issues spanning the political spectrum, their efforts are stymied by jarring policy discontinuities associated with frequent changes in top administrative officials.

### **Establishing Linkages Outside the Policy Subsystem**

When creating new policies, if reformers establish meaningful linkages outside the environmental policy subsystem in question—spreading regulatory responsibilities and building constituencies across numerous agencies and levels of government—they can increase the prospects for the long-term consolidation of reforms. The challenge for reformers in stochastic political systems is to create conditions favorable to path dependence—to begin a process that will generate incentives, expectations, routines, and relationships that reinforce the stability of the new institutional

arrangement. Pierson emphasizes that “path dependent processes will often be most powerful not at the level of individual organizations or institutions but at a more macro level that involves complementary configurations of organizations and institutions” (2000, 255). Some of these other institutions, such as traditional government ministries, may simply be stronger and therefore better able to withstand social upheaval generally, as a result of better funding, long-standing political support, a well-established policy culture, and other elements of path dependence. Moreover, institutions outside the environmental policy subsystem may not be exposed to the same political and economic fluctuations; the pressures they experience may be of different sorts and may occur at different times. When there are numerous institutions involved, even if they individually have the same degree of exposure to social turbulence and similar types of vulnerabilities, as a collection the odds are greater that not all of them will fold.

Linkages established outside an environmental policy subsystem may be horizontal or vertical in nature. Horizontally, the prospects for the consolidation of policy reforms improve to the extent that the normative goals and regulatory routines of new policies are mainstreamed rather than confined to a small environmental agency, with its few dozen employees looking anxiously toward the next election or coup. Kathryn Sikkink’s excellent study of the institutionalization of new economic development policies in Brazil and Argentina is instructive in this regard. In Argentina, the new economic model (“developmentalism,” associated with Raúl Prebisch and other Latin American economists) did not take hold. “Its only true institutional home was the political party apparatus associated with [President] Frondizi . . . and many policies were undermined and revised as soon as Frondizi left office” (Sikkink 1991, 25), a problem compounded by turnover in the Argentinean bureaucracy. In Brazil, in contrast, developmentalism was embraced by industry associations and became embedded in the organizational routines of the National Development Bank, the Development Council, and parts of the Banco do Brasil and the Foreign Ministry. “As part of the institutional identity of these organizations, developmentalist ideas were transmitted in training programs and embodied in laws, procedures, and publications” (Sikkink 1991, 25).

Environmental reformers have pursued similar strategies, seeking horizontal linkages with agencies outside of their particular policy subsystem. In interviews, a top environmental official in the Philippines recounted his efforts to mainstream interest in climate change by inviting his counterpart in the energy ministry to meet with international environmental donors and to directly solicit project funds. Horizontal linkages with ministries of foreign affairs can have a similar effect, as occurred in South Africa under President Mbeki with the establishment of a cabinet-level committee bringing together seventeen agency leaders to coordinate international policy initiatives in support of sustainable development. According to a senior official

involved in the process, “The environmental ministries around the world have had a traditional place in the cabinet: very low down. . . . In the Mbeki administration this has changed. Environmental concerns are becoming more and more of a discussion around market access and international trade relations, so it’s a different vibe.”<sup>7</sup>

Strategies for building vertical linkages include the creation of local constituencies and the partial devolution of regulatory responsibilities to local governments. In recent years, dozens of developing countries have decentralized important features of natural resource policy and management (Ribot 2002). Similar to the dynamic seen with NGOs, when a town or regional government has a vested interest in the long-term viability of a protected area (for watershed protection or local tourism, for example), its leaders can be expected to push for protection of that area despite shifts in national leadership. This arrangement in turn enhances the governing capacity and associated legitimacy of the state because each new agency leader, regardless of political longevity, can “preside” over an intact park system due to local diligence. Hart and colleagues (1997) report that in the course of Rwanda’s devastating civil war in the early 1990s, local community support for gorilla conservation resulted in considerably less poaching than would have been expected given the suspension of functioning government institutions. In contrast, in the political turmoil afflicting Uganda in the 1970s, communities that had recently been deprived by the central government of tradition rights to local forests allowed the degradation of forest resources (Turyahabwe and Banana 2008). Strengthening vertical linkages through decentralization also carries risks. Local governments are highly susceptible to the influence of resource extraction industries and other powerful economic actors, and local politicians may prioritize short-term income-generating opportunities and their associated political benefits (Andersson, Gibson, and Lehoucq 2006). But even the most ardent proponents of democratic decentralization of natural resource management, such as Ribot (2002), argue that decentralization must be accompanied by national regulatory standards.

Vertical linkages established “upward” with international actors and institutions include treaty commitments, participation in transnational advocacy networks, and support from international donors. Because foreign organizations such as the World Bank, the United Nations Development Program, and Conservation International operate outside the domestic political system in question, they are not subjected to the same sources of variance threatening domestic environmental institutions. As is often the case with domestic NGOs and local constituencies, leaders of these international organizations routinely approach newly installed national officials to educate them about ongoing projects and about the social and environmental problems motivating those projects.

Membership in the European Union represents one extreme within the range of vertical relationships. It is difficult to imagine circumstances in which a newly

installed leader in an EU member state experiencing instability could ignore the long-standing environmental commitments of his or her predecessors. The European Union example suggests that a nation's propensity to respect previous treaty commitments—which is crucial to international law and a potentially important source of continuity in stochastic political systems—will be animated to the extent that the country has incentives to comply.

## Conclusions

O'Toole and Meier observe: "Few ideas these days seem as retrograde as the quaint notion that stability can be helpful in the world of public administration. . . . Nothing seems hotter than novelty" (2003, 43–44). Institutional stability is integral to the very meaning of policy change, yet the history of environmental governance in much of the world resembles a growing heap of novelties that have been jettisoned by successive administrations in a context of pervasive political and economic upheaval. Still, many policy innovations have endured. By studying the mechanisms of institutional endurance in chaotic political environments, we can gain a better appreciation for the structural challenges facing environmental policy reformers in non-Western societies and the strategies they deploy to advance environmental agendas in very trying circumstances.

Although the purpose of this analysis is largely exploratory, let me conclude with a prediction, a prescription, and an exhortation. I predict that, on the whole, countries with chronic political and economic instability are less likely to see the consolidation of environmental institutions than are countries experiencing lower levels of social turbulence, though I have also pointed to many contrary examples. I also predict that in these societies, more so than in relatively stable social settings, one will find numerous and explicit efforts at institutional tethering, either through novel institutional designs, multipartisan alliances, or the establishment of linkages outside the policy subsystem. When tethering does not occur in these countries, policy change efforts will fail with greater frequency than in those instances where there is extensive tethering. These tethers can be identified both *ex post* and *ex ante*. Looking backward, one can identify through interviews and archival research the most significant threat faced by a given policy initiative and how that threat was countered. Looking to the future, the researcher can pose questions to knowledgeable practitioners using hypothetical scenarios: what would happen if there were an economic collapse, or a shift in the ruling party? Who would likely speak out against future reversals in fortune? It is during these moments of crisis, either real or counterfactual, that mechanisms of continuity become visible.

This analysis has prescriptive implications as well. Although tethering is a common strategy, it is not universally appreciated or practiced in countries experiencing

chronic instability. Activists and policy reformers on the front lines of environmental struggles are often so preoccupied with putting out the latest brush fire—a legislative proposal that has stalled in the senate, a company illegally harvesting timber from a park—that they fail to reflect on the long-term prospects of environmental institutions. The same is true of the international organizations funding environmental projects in these countries. This analysis suggests that more explicit attention should be given to issues such as the design of state agencies (including personnel policies), the role of policy-oriented nonstate actors, and strategies for establishing horizontal and vertical linkages outside of environmental policy subsystems. Strategic environmental assessment, which has been developed in the European Union to incorporate environmental considerations into national planning efforts, provides one promising model for mainstreaming environmental concerns throughout diverse institutions of government. At local levels, environmental proponents can identify specific high-value resources that require long-term management and can design institutions with social instability in mind (Steinberg 2009).

Finally, this analysis points to the need for closer collaboration between scholars of environmental policy and comparative politics. Environmental policy studies have a lot to learn from comparative politics, with its focus on long-term processes and its vast literature on the non-Western world, in contrast to the highly constrained geographical focus of policy studies. Over two decades after Horowitz (1989) asked, “Is there a third world policy process?” our understanding of policy change in non-OECD countries remains in its infancy. This is a topic that cries out for greater attention from the field of comparative politics. Comparative politics research, in turn, stands to benefit from closer engagement with theories of policy change (see Scharpf 2000). Hall and Taylor argue that “fundamental to any institutional analysis” is “how to explain the process whereby institutions originate or change,” including “explanations for why the regularized patterns of behaviour that we associate with institutions display continuity over time” (1996, 937, 939). Research on institutional consolidation in the unsettled political and economic climates of non-OECD countries can offer important insights into the social mechanisms that promote or hinder institutionalization. This topic lends itself to study from each of the three major theoretical perspectives of comparative politics, described in chapter 2. From an interest-based perspective, one can study the incentives that encourage or dissuade social actors from thinking about the long term (see Stein and Tommasi 2008; Hovi, Sprinz, and Underdal 2009). From a constructivist view, investigators can explore how cultural norms lead actors to sustain or abandon social practices across changes in formal rules. From the perspective of historical institutionalism, one can identify the processes that promote path dependence toward the fulfillment of public-spirited goals. The study of governance across governments brings together the theoretical and the practical, simultaneously focusing attention on the broad



social structures and the microlevel mechanisms that shape the evolution of environmental institutions around the globe.

## Notes

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1. A third component of policy change concerns the need for new institutions to continue evolving in response to changing social conditions (Social Learning Group 2001). The present analysis focuses on the enduring components of institutional reforms, both for conciseness and because it is an important and largely unexplored challenge for environmental governance.

2. Nick Menzies, Executive Director, Asia Institute, University of Los Angeles, personal communication. Paul Butler, Vice President of Global Programs, RARE, personal communication.

3. One strand of this literature focuses on agents of change, exploring the conditions under which NGOs, social movements, and reformers within government have an impact on policy (Rochon and Mazmanian 1993; Barzelay 1992; Grindle and Thomas 1991). Another strand examines the impact of state structures on policy processes and outcomes, including assessments of presidential versus parliamentary systems, administrative styles, voting rules, and bureaucratic structures (Vogel 2003; Jasanoff 1990; Scharpf 2000; Howlett 2002; Egeberg 1999). At the intersection of the two are studies examining the reciprocal influence of state structures and social organizations (Dryzek et al. 2003; Migdal 1987). Neofunctionalist accounts of policy change examine how state structures arise in response to social needs (North 1981) and the ways in which resource endowments make policy reform more or less likely (Silva et al. 2002). Still others show how the sequence and timing of events shape the prospects for change (Pralle 2006; Pierson 2000). The influence of focusing events (Birkland 1997), cross-national diffusion of policy ideas (Busch and Jörgens 2005; Hall 1989), and Europeanization (Cowles, Caporaso, and Risse 2001; Knill 2001) have all attracted attention.

4. Lowry argues that the literature has paid too little attention to forces for change originating within policy subsystems, but he does not contest the fundamental importance of exogenous shocks.

5. Data on coups calculated from *Polity IV: Regime Authority Characteristics and Transitions Datasets 1800–2010* (Center for International Development and Conflict Management, University of Maryland, College Park). Includes only countries with population over 500,000. Available at <http://www.systemicpeace.org/inscr/inscr.htm>. Regime change calculation is based on data from Banks 2011. Inflation figures are calculated from the International Monetary Fund's International Financial Statistics database. The figures on armed conflicts are from Eriksen and Wallensteen 2004. Figures on the lifespan of democracies are from Przeworski 2005.

6. Within the policy implementation literature, authors such as Patashnik (2008) and Mazmanian and Sabatier (1983) consider the long-term fate of policy reforms in the United States.

7. Interview with author, December 4, 2001.



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