

# Strategies, Norms and Rules: Applying the Grammar of Institutions to Local Politics

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A work in progress –all comments gratefully received.

**Abstract:** *While Elinor Ostrom's work on institutions has provided an important reference point for local government scholars over recent years, the Grammar of Institutions that she developed with Sue Crawford (Crawford and Ostrom 1995; Ostrom 2005), has received little attention. The core argument of this paper is that this Grammar can add value to local politics research and indeed to political research more generally. It does this in three ways. First, it can provide a parsimonious meta-language for describing political institutions thereby helping to organise the existing literature and facilitating better conversations between research projects. Second, the Grammar offers a foundation from which local political institutions can be categorised. An initial typology is offered to illustrate this point. Finally the distinction between strategies, norms and rules can help inform the work of institutional entrepreneurs as they seek to develop strategies for institutional change. The paper discusses each of these claims in turn before the using the example of party group loyalty in UK local politics to illustrate the approach.*

The way in which institutions, particularly informal institutions, shape the orientations, attitudes and behaviours of local politicians has been catching the interest of many local government scholars. While the literature is growing so is the diversity of ways in which these institutions have been described. As well as beliefs, customs, conventions, norms and rules, researchers have pointed to local political culture (Leach and Wilson 2002), unwritten constitutions (Karlsson 2012) and local governing codes (Mckenna 2010). This interest reflects wider arguments about 'the centrality of institutions to an understanding of political behaviour and political outcomes' (Lowndes and Roberts 2013, p. 199). New Institutionalists in particular are interested in the way in which the existing institutions of local government shape responses to new institutions such as those associated with modernisation for example (Lowndes and Wilson 2003). There are many recent examples of research that reflect these concerns including in the context of political leadership (Gains *et al.* 2005; Leach and Lowndes 2007; Gains *et al.* 2009), relationships between elected and non elected officials (Leach and Lowndes 2007), partnership working (Davies 2004) or public participation (Lowndes *et al.* 2006; Barnes *et al.* 2007).

The paper seeks to contribute to this literature by arguing that the Grammar of Institutions proposed by Crawford and Ostrom (1995; Ostrom 2005) can add value to

institutional analysis and theory, both in the field of local politics and for political studies more widely. It provides a parsimonious means of organising a diversity of institutional understandings into a single manageable framework and offers insights into the way in which institutions shape the behaviour of political actors. By breaking down institutional statements into their primary components the Grammar's allows scholars to accurately distinguish between; *strategies* which describe the collective actions that are seen as sensible in given situations; *norms* which describe strategies that are accompanied by a sense of obligation; and *rules* which describe norms associated with enforceable sanctions. Or to put it another way: 'Individuals adopt strategies in light of the norms they hold and within the rules of the situation within which they are interacting' (Ostrom 2005, p. 175).

While the broad thrust of Ostrom's work on institutions has been widely appreciated in the local government literature, the Grammar of Institutions itself has received little attention. While this is also broadly the case in the wider politics literature there has been some recent interest in applying the Grammar (also known as the Institutional Grammar Tool) in disciplines such as policy analysis (Siddiki *et al.* 2011). This is a missed opportunity as the Grammar can offer plenty of added value to political institutional analysis and theory. While associated primarily with Rational Choice Theory the Grammar is a conceptual framework that is nevertheless compatible with sociological and other approaches to actor motivation. By breaking institutional rules down into clearly defined and connected components the Grammar should help 'strengthen our understanding of the link between institutions and theories of action' (Crawford and Ostrom 1995, p. 596).

The core argument of this paper is that the distinction between strategies, norms and rules can help scholars in three important ways. First it can provide a parsimonious meta-language for describing institutions and thereby support greater cooperation between research projects. Second it offers a solid foundation for the categorisation of the institutions associated with formal politics. In this paper an initial typology is offered to illustrate this point. Third it can provide insights for institutional entrepreneurs as they seek to build new institutions and adapt existing ones. In particular it implies that three different classes of institutional logic, namely

rational, normative and punitive logics, can be associated with strategies, norms and rules respectively. This knowledge is important for institutional entrepreneurs as it allows them to understand which institutions are likely to have the most purchase for actors and which change strategies are likely to be the most effective. Each of these claims will be discussed in the sections that follow. The example of party group loyalty in the UK will then be used to illustrate the approach. First, however, it is important to say a little about the Grammar itself.

### **1. *The Grammar of Institutions***

The Grammar of Institutions was developed by Crawford and Ostrom in response to a ‘simmering theoretical debate about what institutions are’ (1995, p. 582). They argued that rather than having to choose between conceptions of institutions as strategies, norms or rules, researchers should work within a single framework that encompasses all three. Crawford and Ostrom use the term *institutional statement* to include these seemingly competing concepts where:

*Institutional statement* refers to a shared linguistic constraint or opportunity that prescribes, permits, or advises actions or outcomes for actors (both individual and corporate). Institutional statements are spoken, written, or tacitly understood in a form intelligible to actors in an empirical setting. In theoretical analyses, institutional statements will often be interpretations or abstractions of empirical constraints and opportunities. (Crawford and Ostrom 1995, p. 583)

The statements associated with the Grammar are not in themselves institutions but rather a reflection how institutions are perceived. Nevertheless, if the statements are accurate and if the accounts of actors are reliable then they should provide a solid basis upon which descriptions of institutions can be based. As Lowndes and Roberts (2013) have suggested, institutions may be understood as formal written rules, as spoken narratives or as practices that are neither written nor spoken, simply copied. It is relatively straightforward for researchers to derive institutional statements from written or spoken statements although in both of these cases confirmation should be sought through observation that the institutions

referred to are genuinely in-use. Where institutions are practices, in other words repeated patterns of behaviour that are not explicitly articulated, the researcher will need to prompt actors to see that that they are recognised ways of doing things. However institutions are understood they must be both shared and known by actors (Schlüter and Theesfeld 2010).

According to Crawford and Ostrom, shared strategies, norms and rules are all types of institutional statement. They can be clearly and precisely differentiated by being broken down into five structural components; ATTRIBUTES, DEONTIC, AIM, CONDITIONS AND OR ELSE:

Regardless of how institutional statements are expressed in natural language, they can be rewritten in the ADICO format, where:

**A** ATTRIBUTES is a holder for any value of a participant- level variable that distinguishes to whom the institutional statement applies (e.g., 18 years of age, female, college-educated, 1-year experience, or a specific position, such as employee or supervisor).

**D** DEONTIC is a holder for the three modal verbs using deontic logic: *may* (permitted), *must* (obliged), and *must not* (forbidden).

**I** AIM is a holder that describes particular actions or outcomes to which the deontic is assigned.

**C** CONDITIONS is a holder for those variables which define when, where, how, and to what extent an AIM is permitted, obligatory, or forbidden.

**O** OR ELSE is a holder for those variables which define the sanctions to be imposed for not following a rule.

All shared strategies can be written as [ATTRIBUTES] [AIM] [CONDITIONS] (AIC); all norms can be written as [ATTRIBUTES] [DEONTIC] [AIM] [CONDITIONS] (ADIC); and all rules can be written as: [ATTRIBUTES] [DEONTIC] [AIM] [CONDITIONS] [OR ELSE] (ADICO). The syntax is cumulative: norms contain all of the components of a shared strategy plus a

DEONTIC; rules contain all the components of a norm plus an OR ELSE.  
(Crawford and Ostrom 1995, p. 584)

While strategies may be considered as prudent options, things that might be done given certain conditions, the Grammar dictates that they acquire the status of norms when actors consider these courses of action as imperatives; things that they must or must not do. What underpins the ‘must’ is the sense of moral or social duty felt by actors hence the language changes from that of ‘wise judgement’ to that of obligation (Crawford and Ostrom 1995, p. 587). The expectation is for ‘negative repercussions to follow behaviours that do not conform to the prescription and positive rewards to follow compliance’ (Crawford and Ostrom 1995, p. 587). Normative responses may be external, linked to a sense of reputation, and driven by how actors perceive that other actors will see them for following a given course of action. Additionally or alternatively they may be internal, leading to feelings of guilt or shame (Crawford and Ostrom 1995, p. 587). Schlüter and Theesfeld (2010) suggest that it is appropriate to take this distinction a stage further and identify personal norms and social norms separately. Within the syntax of the Grammar of Institutions the place holder for this obligation is known as the DEONTIC.

Within the Grammar the sanction associated with a rule is very clearly defined and the distinction between OR ELSE’s and the personal and social obligations associated with the DEONTIC are clear. For a rule to qualify as a rule the OR ELSE must meet three criteria (Ostrom 2005, p. 150):

- Rules must be enforced and there must be a collective understanding of the range of punishments and clearly assigned authority and procedures for imposing them.
- Rules must be monitored by specialised individuals or by other actors and there must be a collective understanding of these arrangements. Those that monitor may be the same as those that enforce but this does not have to be the case.

- The OR ELSE must be crafted in an arena suitable for that purpose such as a legislature or a court for example.

More recently Siddiki *et al* (2011) have proposed adding a sixth component to the Grammar; that of the OBJECT. They define it as ‘the inanimate or animate part of a statement that is the receiver of the action described in the aim and executed by the agent in the Attribute’ (Siddiki *et al.* 2011, p. 85). With this addition to the Grammar shared strategies, norms and rules can be written ABIC, ABDIC and ABDICO respectively.

Having elaborated the formal structure that underpins the Grammar, the next section will show how it can be used as a meta-language to help organise the literature relating to local political institutions.

## **2. *Distinguishing the Strategies, Norms and Rules of Local Politics***

One way in which the Grammar can be helpful is to organise the different institutional concepts that can be found within the existing local politics literature. Strategies have long been coded within formal constitutions and guidance where they will be often prefaced with the word ‘should’, suggesting a preferred rather than required course of action. Informal conventions, long observed in the literature can also be observed as strategies. In their study of West Midlands authorities Maddick and Pritchard (1958) found that these conventions played an important role in shaping council processes such as policy making, public relations and the way that party groups operated. These conventions were founded primarily upon utility with their specific forms ‘being the product of local characteristics and habits, and influenced by outstanding individuals of successive generations’ (Maddick and Pritchard 1958, p. 155). A little over ten years later Grant (1971) also noted how informal ‘rules of the game’ helped with the management of potential inter group conflicts such as the allocation of committee chairs and press relationships by permitting a ‘working consensus’. Hence such informal conventions, often crafted with advice from non elected officers, were largely value free in the formal political

sense and had an important role in filling the gaps in written constitutions and regulating political activity.

While norms are less easy to spot in the literature than strategies, particularly in formal documents where the language of obligation is less likely to be made explicit, the belief systems that inform the sense of obligation, that turns a strategy into a norm, can be found. Local government scholars are well aware of the internal and external aspects of the notions of democracy held by local politicians which are a consequence both of personal characteristics and of the institutional environment (Denters and Klok; Heinelt 2012b). Crucially these notions of democracy act as ‘causal mechanisms between political institutions and actor behaviour’ (Karlsson 2012, p. 2). This “sub-universe of meaning” routinely-constructed by members themselves’ can, consciously or unconsciously, generate bias in the local political system, helping local politicians to differentiate legitimate demands and to identify the ‘right’ thing to do (Saunders 1976, p. 34). The relationships that local politicians maintain with key groups such as business leaders are also legitimised by these belief systems (Davies 2004). Local politicians are able to determine that a course of action is not only sensible but ‘the right thing to do’ as a consequence of the belief systems they adhere to.

Rules, being so tightly defined within the Grammar are, as might be expected, hard to find in the existing local politics literature. This is not to say that such rules do not exist but rather that scholars have not been looking to evidence them. Indeed, local politics is an arena awash with formal sanctions. The party group, the council constitution and a complex of statutory mechanisms all serve to govern political life. Through the lens of the Grammar, however, institutional rules in the local government literature are very rarely rules. Without the evidence of a clearly understood sanction the rules that local government scholars refer to are more likely to be norms or even strategies.

While recent interest has tended to focus on informal institutions, the Grammar suggests that formal and informal aspects have to be considered as part of a single institutional complex. Indeed, a further benefit of using the Grammar is that



it provides a more nuanced view on the relationship between the formal and the informal. As Kenny and Lowndes (2011) suggest, occurrences of purely formal or informal institutions will be rare and that instead attention should be placed on the balance between the formal and informal elements and the balance between them. The Grammar of Institutions offers the additional idea that individual norms and rules may themselves consist of both formal and informal components. So, for example, an unwritten rule may nevertheless be backed up with a formal sanction or a written protocol may be supported by an unwritten obligation. Or to put this another way, while strategies may be either formal or informal, the DEONTIC is most likely to be informal and the OR ELSE formal.

Once institutional statements have been verified, therefore, the Grammar provides a meta-language for accurately describing political institutions both by allowing statements to be broken down into their structural components and by distinguishing between strategies, norms and rules. When reviewing the literature it becomes easier to compare like with like as a precise identification of specific institutional statements using this scheme allows the links between research to be more easily shared and commonalities identified. Hence the Grammar might also support a better conversation between case study research and large-n surveys as the relative merits of each have been a focus for debate (Lowndes and Leach 2004; Gains *et al.* 2009). To achieve a more fine grained analysis, however, requires a scheme of classification that goes beyond the distinction between strategies, norms and rules and sorts each into defined types. This is the focus of the next section.

### ***3. Building a Typology of Local Political Institutions***

The distinction between strategies, norms and rules provides a foundation from which different institutions can be categorised. Addressing the diversity of understandings of institutions is an important issue for scholars and more than simply an exercise in naval gazing. As Ostrom has argued, being serious about working with institutional rules means having a coherent system for working with them:

What rules are important for institutional analysis? A myriad of specific rules are used in structuring complex action arenas. Scholars have been trapped into endless cataloguing of rules not related to a method of classification most useful for theoretical explanations. But classification is a necessary step in developing a science. Anyone attempting to define a useful typology of rules must be concerned that the classification is more than a method for imposing superficial order into an extremely large set of seemingly disparate rules.” (Ostrom 1999, pp. 51-52)

In order to illustrate the point an initial typology for local politics is offered here (see table x attached). While following the choices of the author it nevertheless reflects widely used concepts drawn from the politics literature. The proposed typology, described in more detail below, provides the option of distinguishing between institutional statements according to their OBJECT (this applies to strategies, norms and rules), the obligation associated with the DEONTIC (this applies to norms and rules) or the sanction associated with the OR ELSE (this only applies to rules). It should be noted that this typology is intended to refer to the institutions associated with formal local politics and especially those that shape the behaviour of local politicians. It should, however, be equally applicable to other levels of government, indeed it may help to establish the existence or otherwise of common institutional forms between tiers.

In the local political context institutional statements can be divided between those that are concerned with an OBJECT that is internal to the arena of local politics, and those that have an external OBJECT. This element of the typology is in many ways generic. Indeed, Ostrom provides a framework for categorising the rules within any given action arena that has been widely referenced. It provides seven categories of rules namely; position, boundary, choice, aggregation, information, payoff and scope (Ostrom 2005, pp. 186-215). A different categorisation is needed for those statements that have inputs into the local political arena as their OBJECT such as, for example, those which originate from national government, the public, partnerships, pressure groups and officers. Inputs may take the form of simple policy demands requiring the change of a single rule (for the funding of a single

voluntary group for example), the requirement to introduce a new policy, in other words a set of rules, or may even relate to an entirely new institutional framework (such as the change to a cabinet system in the UK for example). Institutional statements could be classified, therefore, according to the origin of the OBJECT (government, public etc) or the type of OBJECT (demand, policy, framework etc). Here, however, the choice is to classify statements according to the actor's orientation towards the OBJECT. (Parallel to the framework proposed by Helmke and Levitsky (2004) in order to study the relationships between formal and informal political institutions, institutions might be classified as either supportive, substitutive, adaptive or resistive.

In terms of the obligations associated with the DEONTIC (the may, must or must not in a statement) the proposed typology associates them with well documented political belief systems; framed here as the *representative*, *patron* and *performer* systems. Belief systems parallel Lauth's 'Informal Institutions of Political Participation – informal 'well established behavioural structures and patterns' with 'differing modes and logic of informal influence (Lauth 2000, p. 25). Each is 'characterized conclusively by the way in which each enacts its respective means of influence' (Lauth 2000, p. 26). Each is also named according to the position from which influence is derived. The *representative* belief system may be the most significant and is broken down here into the classic three sub categories of representational style; trustee, delegate and party soldier. Clientelism is another significant system and is also included in the typology below as the *patron* system. A third system, recently discussed in the literature, and related to the New Public Management, associates the success of political actors with the quality of services and outputs; this is named as the *performer* system. This list is of course far from exhaustive. Other possible types not discussed here could include the participatory system (Box 1998; Sullivan 2001) where the politician has the role of *facilitator*, the coercive system, where the role is one of *autocrat* or the particularist system where the role might be described as *clan chief*.

Within the field of local politics OR ELSEs can be associated with votes, office or policy when describing rules. The idea that political actors may be vote-seeking,

office-seeking or policy-seeking (Strom 1990), well known in the politics literature, can be applied to the notion of sanctions as it is assumed that political actors will recognise a reduction in any of these categories as something to be avoided. Each of these categories can be captured within the tight definition of the OR ELSE associated with a rule described previously.

First, elections provide a mechanism that the public can use to punish local politicians if they think they are not fulfilling their roles as they should. The electoral process is subject to clear laws and politicians are clear about the impact that a loss of votes will have on their ability to govern and, more specifically their ability to hold office and achieve policy aims. Furthermore electoral success is widely understood to provide a critical incentive for local politicians even if they suspect that national trends may be more influential (Stoker 1991).

Second, OR ELSEs may be associated with formal positions and are prescribed, monitored and administered by the relevant responsible body whether the party, council or national organisation such as the Local Government Ombudsman. The benefits of office 'refer to private goods bestowed on recipients of politically discretionary governmental and subgovernmental appointments' (Strom 1990, p. 567). The associated sanction, therefore, implies the suspension or removal of office or the reduction of the benefits associated with it. Office sanctions may be associated with rules of conduct both within the local government and the party arenas. Breaking rules associated with standards of behaviour can therefore lead to loss of privileges, suspension or even expulsions for individual local politicians.

Third, the policy seeking politician seeks office but not for the private benefits it bestows but for its instrumental value in helping to achieve policy aims; what Bulpitt (1995) has described as governing competence. Policy sanctions, therefore, will be associated with the holding of office but also with the influence associated with that office. The boundaries of the formal influence that local politicians enjoy are determined by national, regional and local law and policy. At the national or regional level in countries such as the UK, where local government does not enjoy

constitutional protection, central government has, in certain circumstances, the ability to temporarily or permanently remove powers from local councils either individually or collectively if its prescriptions are not being met. At the local level formal powers can be altered by councils themselves. The most likely scenarios for this to happen include the removal of authority positions from opposition groups or the removal of responsibilities of local politicians acting at community level. This OR ELSE can be summarised as a reduction in power.

One added benefit of adopting a typology of this kind is that it lends itself to a descriptive shorthand as institutional statements can be written in simple compound form. Strategies would be referred to simply by their OBJECT, for example; *position*, *boundary* or *supportive*. Norms would be referred to by their OBJECT and by the belief system that is linked to their DEONTIC, for example; *choice-trustee* or *adaptive-patron*. Rules would be written as triple compounds adding the sanction associated with the OR ELSE to the OBJECT and the belief system, for example; *resistive-delegate-vote* or *supportive-performer-policy*.

The Grammar of institutions can, however, provide much more than a parsimonious descriptive scheme, valuable though this is. In distinguishing between strategies, norms and rules the Grammar provides the foundation of a more nuanced view of how they shape the behaviour of political actors and how institutional change might be understood and managed. These are the topics of the next two sections.

#### **4. *Implications for Institutional Entrepreneurship***

Institutional entrepreneurship is a term originally associated with DiMaggio who, seeking to emphasise the role of agency in institutional formation and development, argued that: “New institutions arise when organized actors with sufficient resources (institutional entrepreneurs) see in them an opportunity to realize interests that they value highly” (DiMaggio 1988, p. 14). Hence institutional entrepreneur may refer to ‘either individuals or organizations that act in discordance with the established institutional arrangements and that may eventually change them’ (Leca *et al.* 2006).

In the context of local politics institutional entrepreneurship is likely to be associated with local political leadership or national policy makers. Such change is, of course, both important and challenging:

Changing institutions is the most powerful weapon in the reformer's arsenal. To change political institutions is to alter actors' sense of what is possible and impossible, desirable and undesirable. But institutional change – as opposed to organisational restructuring – is hard to achieve. Institutional change causes values and identities to be reappraised; it destabilises existing patterns of power and disadvantage. Informal institutional elements are especially hard to dislodge, often persisting long after formal changes have been put in place. (Lowndes and Leach 2004, p. 561)

The Grammar of Institutions offers important insights for institutional entrepreneurship as the distinction between three different types of institution implies a distinction between three different classes of institutional logic. Institutional logics are not the same as institutions, they provide the vocabularies of motive (ref) from which institutions are elaborated by actors. The concept of institutional logics, first introduced by Friedland and Alford (1991) refers to the 'central logics that provide principles of organization and legitimacy.. while institutions are the rules of the game institutional logics are the underlying principles of the game' (Leca and Naccache 2006, p. 632). Institutional logics 'provide a link between individual agency and cognition and socially constructed institutional practices and rule structures' (Thornton and Ocasio 2008, p. 101). Institutional logics will be diverse and may be conflicting but, if institutional entrepreneurs want to adapt existing institutions they need to understand the institutions they are founded upon. Similarly, new institutions should be justified with reference to existing institutional logics (Leca and Naccache 2006).

Applying the Grammar allows institutional entrepreneurs to differentiate between the three different types of institutional logic that can be associated with strategies, norms and rules respectively. Shared strategies can be associated with a rational logic, norms with an obligatory logic and rules with a punitive logic. These distinctions, which are summarised in table x, are discussed in more detail below.

Table x: Institutional statements and their institutional logics

Institution	Stated as	Institutional Logic	Reward/Sanction	Durability	Change Strategies
Strategy	<u>ABIC</u> Attribute oBject aIm Condition	Rational	Effectiveness	Weak	Persuasion, better alternatives
Norm	<u>ABDIC</u> Attribute oBject Deontic aIm Condition	Obligatory	Informal, individual or group	Medium	Strategic actions, socialisation initiatives, incentives
Rule	<u>ABDICO</u> Attribute oBject Deontic aIm Condition Or else	Punitive	Formal, collectively agreed, monitored and assigned	Strong	Judicial interventions, rule or law changes

The institutional logics associated with strategies are rational. This is not to say that actors will be able to point to a specific rationale for their way of doing things but they will believe that there is a reason and that this reason will be linked to the effectiveness of the behaviour in question. Actor motives will refer to the activity in question and not a sense of obligation or sanction that is not directly connected to that activity. The institutional logics associated with norms are obligatory. They refer to a sense of appropriateness that justifies the action from a moral perspective. Hence the reason for doing something may not be connected with the efficiency and effectiveness of the activity in its own terms. The institutional logics associated with rules on the other hand are punitive. The expected consequence of failing to comply with a rule is clearly defined and enforced by set of institutional arrangements established for that purpose.

This distinction is useful for institutional entrepreneurship in two ways. First it suggests a hierarchy of institutions in terms of their ability to influence the behaviour of actors. As actors operate in an environment shaped by many institutional logics some of which will be conflicting this is useful to know. Institutions founded on rational logics are likely to be trumped by those founded on normative logics that will in turn be trumped by those founded on punitive logics. Institutional entrepreneurs should therefore seek out the strongest available logic upon which to build new institutions if they are to succeed in competition with established frameworks.

The second way in which the distinction between strategies, norms and rules is useful for institutional entrepreneurs is that it provides a more informed basis for designing strategies for adapting existing institutions. It seems reasonable to assume that strategies will be the least durable and therefore the most susceptible to change. As actors may be influenced by simple incentives or even a well made argument so the process of change will have learning at its heart. Furthermore, where local politicians observe that new ways of doing things are successful this may encourage them to adopt these new approaches rather than fall behind other councils. Institutional change may spread rapidly in this way so that the new ways of doing things become system wide (Gains et al. 2005, p. 26).

Norms will be more difficult to change in particular where obligations are internalised to a high degree by actors. However, institutions are not fixed and can be changed by the strategic actions of individuals (Lowndes 1996). Interventions should focus on the socialisation processes that reinforce local political norms and the ways in which they are supported. Change depends on individuals, both inside and outside of local government, having the capacity 'to challenge dominant rules and norms and to question the ways in which the rules of the game are defined', not just challenging old institutions but fostering 'the new linguistic and symbolic resources from which such challenges might flow' (Barnes *et al.* 2007, p. 201). If powerful incentives are found that change behaviour the resulting cognitive dissonance may be enough to cause actors to adjust their normative framework to allow them to feel comfortable with their decision (Schlüter and Theesfeld 2010). Rules will require judicial interventions if they are to be changed. This means



altering the rules and laws that relate to the vote, office and policy sanctions. It may also only be these changes that can create incentives powerful enough to dislodge entrenched normative frameworks.

Having highlighted the three ways in which the distinctions between strategies, norms and rules can be useful to scholars of local politics, the next section will seek to illustrate these claims by means of a specific example.

#### ***4. Applying the Grammar: The Case of Party Group Loyalty***

The tendency for local politicians to vote en masse with their party colleagues in council meetings is a well observed feature of local political life (Copus 2004). This is not a behaviour prescribed by law or by the constitutions of local councils but rather an example of an unwritten institution. Nor is this a behaviour that can always be expected. Different parties may be more or less inclined to enforce group loyalty and individual councillors may follow either their own conscience or the wishes of the voters instead of the party line (Copus 2004). This is more than an issue of academic interest. The potential conflict between party group loyalty and attempts to strengthen local political leadership is one example of the relevance of this issue (Leach and Wilson 2008). Another is the concern over the potential undermining of the scrutiny function in the UK, introduced as a counterbalance the cabinet style form of decision making introduced just over a decade ago, by bloc voting (Leach and Copus 2004). Indeed, the Welsh Government has gone as far as to formally prohibit parties from instructing councillors how to vote on scrutiny committees as part of a recent Local Government Measure (Welsh Government 2011).

The example of party group loyalty is explored here in order to illustrate the value of distinguishing between strategies, norms and rules. As well as its significance to research and practice it will also be widely recognised by local politics scholars in its formulation within the MAELG (Municipal Assemblies in European Local Governance) survey. This is a survey of local politicians carried out in 2007 and 2008 in fifteen European countries and Israel. The resulting data set, which has been used to inform a number of research projects, includes responses from about

12,000 councillors from approximately 1,400 municipalities. Results from this work have been used to inform a number of research projects (Heinelt 2012a). The formulation of the institutional statements used below draws on the wording used for the relevant question within the MAELG survey.

An imaginary researcher undertaking fieldwork to better understand party group loyalty will observe the voting behaviours of councillors, listen to the testimony of those involved and consider any relevant written documents such as those associated with the council constitution or the party group's standing order. If the researcher is satisfied that the institution associated with party group loyalty in council meetings is not associated with either a DEONTIC or an OR ELSE then it can be described as a strategy. This is a statement that the researcher might reasonably expect to find. As Copus has observed, loyalty to the party group in local politics is often understood simply as the natural way of doing things: 'Whether the party has a tight or loose view of public unity 'consistency, regularity and the traditions of political behaviour by councillors, ensure that political activity is conducted in familiar ways' (Copus, 106-7). The institutional statement that describes it might therefore be written using the Grammar like this (this is in fact the precise text of the MAELG survey question):

*Councillors [Attribute] vote with their party group [Aim] on a motion [Object] when there is a conflict between a member's own opinion, the opinion of the party group in the council or the opinion of the voters [Condition]*

This statement can be categorised as a *choice* strategy in other words one that specifies what an actor would normally do 'at a particular point in the decision process in light of conditions that have, or have not, been met at that point in the process' (Ostrom 2005, p. 200). It might therefore be usefully considered alongside other choice strategies adopted by local politicians, either in general or as they relate to voting at council meetings in which case a sub category of 'voting' might usefully be employed. The sanction associated with the strategy is a loss of efficiency or effectiveness, in other words, not voting with your party might make party

management in Council meetings more difficult, lead to less predictable outcomes or a less considered decision.

The implications for institutional entrepreneurship are twofold. First, as the institutional logic is rational, in other words referring to the ‘best way of doing voting’, the institutional entrepreneur wishing to change the AIM, to say ‘vote with the voters’, and seeking to persuade councillors to adopt this alternative regular course of action could simply appeal to a rational alternative that is more efficient or effective. Ideally this would be an alternative that can be illustrated with reference to in-use examples elsewhere. Second, the rational logic associated with a strategy can be trumped by either norm or a rule. The institutional entrepreneur, therefore, may wish to introduce a competing institution with an alternative AIM, as above, and ensure that it is associated with an available obligation or sanction that will establish a norm or rule. If, for example, the beliefs and values of the party group in question reflect the ‘delegate’ belief system then it should be straightforward to establish a norm based on this.

Rather than finding that party voting behaviour reflects a strategy it is perhaps more likely that the researcher will find it associated with a norm and that actions are more than simply taken for granted but reflect the individual and / or collective beliefs and values of actors. Collective sanctions are recognised as a form of informal discipline in this context: ‘Generally councillors are very unwilling to expose themselves to group discipline because of the uncertainty, personal disquiet and feeling of embarrassment, isolation and failure such processes will bring’ (Copus 2004, p. 108). This sense of obligation arises from internal as well as external conditions: ‘Loyalty to the party group arises at least as much from a councillor’s own predispositions towards public unity as well as interpretations of what democracy means and how it is realised, alongside views about the role of the councillor , as well as political philosophy’ (Copus 2004, p. 108). In the case that this institution is found to be a norm the statement might look like this:

*Councillors [Attribute] must [Deontic] vote with their party group [Aim] on a motion [Object] when there is a conflict between a member's own opinion, the opinion of the party group in the council or the opinion of the voters [Condition]*

The important question here is what does the 'must' signify? It is the 'must' of the statement that signposts a powerful influence upon the behaviour of the actor. A likely explanation is that it reflects the belief system associated with the party soldier representation style. Local politicians who adhere to this system will be guided by their belief that the party is the legitimate focus for local politics and that voting with the party is the right thing to do. This system is a common feature of local political life (for example Karlsson 2012). The institution in question might therefore be described as a *choice-party* norm.

As the institution in question is a norm the institutional entrepreneur cannot simply appeal to a better way of doing things as. Short of a local politician having a 'road to Damascus' moment, altering this sense of obligation will require a commitment from influential members of the party group to foster an alternative set of beliefs such as is associated with the delegate system for example. An alternative is to establish a competing rule, with an office or policy sanction, that can override this norm either in law, within the council's constitution, or through the party group's standing orders. What such a rule would look like is, however, difficult to imagine as it would in some degree restrict the ability of elected representatives to vote freely. A more viable possibility is that the vote sanction is utilised. This might be achieved through a mechanism such as a 'right to recall' for constituents or by much clearer communication to the voters about the voting behaviours of local politicians.

A third possibility is that the imaginary researcher may find, as well as evidence that following the party line in council meetings is shaped by a sense of obligation, that there are clear sanctions in place and that the institution shaping behaviour is a rule. As noted above, the sanction associated with such a rule must be enforced, collectively understood, formally monitored and crafted in an arena suitable for that purpose such as a legislature or a court for example. For this

example the rule in question may form part of the party group's own standing orders and may carry demotion or even suspension as a punishment. Alternatively local politicians may subscribe to the idea that a party disunited in public will lose votes and the OR ELSE associated with consistently voting against the party is to lose elections. Taking this former option the rule in question would be of the choice-party-office type and would be written like this:

*Councillors [Attribute] must [Deontic] vote with their party group [Aim] on a motion [Object] when there is a conflict between a member's own opinion, the opinion of the party group in the council or the opinion of the voters [Condition] or the party will discipline and them [OR ELSE]*

For the institutional entrepreneur such a rule will be extremely difficult to either adapt or replace. Other than the party being willing to change its governing arrangements it is perhaps only through a legal instrument that such a rule can be challenged.

## **6. Conclusion**

This paper has argued that the Grammar of Institutions can be an important addition to the toolbox of local government research. To this end three specific claims have been made; that it provides a precise means of describing institutions; that it provides the foundation for a parsimonious scheme of classification; and by providing a distinction between strategies, norms and rules, that it helps institutional entrepreneurs both to understand the different ways in which institutions shape the behaviours of actors and how these institutions might be adapted or countered. As Crawford and Ostrom have argued; by breaking institutional rules down into clearly defined and connected components the Grammar should help 'strengthen our understanding of the link between institutions and theories of action' (1995, p. 596). The worked example of party group loyalty, elaborated in the previous section, has been used to illustrate these claims.

While the simplicity of this scheme is appealing it should not be considered uncontroversial. Schlüter and Theesfeld argue that 'neither the distinction between

strategies and norms nor the distinction between norms and rules is clear-cut' (2010, p. 467). They point to the difficulty in finding any strategies which are not in some sense normative and in distinguishing between norms and rules if the OR ELSE is not juridical and precise, concluding that 'the creation of infallible boxes for institutional statements, similar to a language Grammar, is impossible' (Schlüter and Theesfeld 2010, p. 468). While these critiques do not imply a disagreement with the underlying value of the Grammar they do underline the need for refinement and development. Indeed, in treating the Grammar as a language the researcher should expect instability, challenge and change in its usage as well as the irregularity that comes from contact with the 'real' world of political actors.

A second difficulty arises from the fluid and contested nature of institutions themselves. An institutional statement can only capture something about an institution at a given point and a given time. As institutions are constantly changing the researcher needs to take care that this limitation is clearly managed. At the same time institutions will rarely be perfectly translated into actions by actors. They do break rules, they do go against norms and they do question the need to do things the way that they have always been done. The challenge for the researcher is to be confident that the institutional statement in question is sufficiently shared and to determine what this means.

While the Grammar can provide added value for local politics research, the field of local politics also provides a potentially useful test bed for developing the Grammar. The local political area is a distinctive one that can provide an ideal research laboratory for institutional analysts. Actors can be clearly defined as can the exclusive 'back room' spaces where these actors interact (Woods 1998). Both the sheer number of local political systems and their propinquity, in other words the relatively small size of the urban space in which interactions take place, make them an ideal focus for comparative research (John 2006).

Finally, it is worth noting that the Grammar of institutions is only one component of the much broader Institutional Analysis and Development Framework and working with the Grammar opens up, therefore, a much wider territory for local

government scholars. This framework aims to help scholars ‘understand the ways in which institutions operate and change over time’ and it ‘assigns all relevant explanatory factors and variables to categories and locates these categories within a foundational structure of logical relationships’ (McGinnis 2011, p. 169). This ‘multi tier conceptual map’ (Ostrom 2011, p. 9), which has been developed and refined by Ostrom and her colleagues over 30 years, provides a ‘means of organizing inquiry into a subject and a set of variables to examine—or at least a set of questions to ask’ (Blomquist and deLeon 2011, p. 1). Given the increasing importance of institutional analysis to local government scholars this is a framework well worth exploring although beyond the scope of this paper.

***Acknowledgement:** The central idea for this paper was developed from a suggestions made by members of the EGPA 2012 Local Governance and Democracy Study Group. Dr Marcel Boogers suggested the term ‘Grammar of local politics’. The author is grateful for the comments received at the Political Studies Association Conference 2013 in Cardiff, from Dr Mark Roberts, De Montfort University and from Dr Saba Siddiki, Indiana University. All of which have proved invaluable.*

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*Table x: A Typology of Local Political Institutional Statements*

<b>Objects</b>	<i>Associated with strategies, norms and rules</i>
Internal	The object of the strategy exists within the local political action arena
<i>a) Position</i>	Create the “anonymous slots” into and out which participants move’
<i>b) Boundary</i>	Define the eligibility criteria, the selection process and the terms of leaving for a given position
<i>c) Choice</i>	Determine what participants might do at a given point in decision making
<i>d) Aggregation</i>	Determine when decisions need to be made by multiple participants
<i>e) Information</i>	Determine who is allowed to know what and when
<i>f) Payoff</i>	Determine the rewards or sanctions that apply to the performance of participants
<i>g) Scope</i>	Set the limits of what can or cannot be affected by the actions of participants
External	The object of the strategy exists outside the local political action arena
<i>a) Supportive</i>	Support and consolidate strong incoming institutions that are seen to have desirable outcomes
<i>b) Adaptive</i>	Subvert and alter strong incoming institutions that are seen to have unwanted outcomes
<i>c) Substitutive</i>	Provide alternative means of achieving the same aims as weak incoming institutions
<i>d) Resistive</i>	Reject or emasculate weak incoming institutions that are seen to have unwanted outcomes
<b>Obligations</b>	<i>Associated with the DEONTIC (may, must or must not) of norms or rules</i>
Representative	Legitimate influence derives from the act of being elected. Local politicians are obliged to act in way that reinforces this principle.
<i>a) Trustee</i>	Local politicians are obliged to act according to their own best judgement
<i>b) Delegate</i>	Local politicians are obliged to act according to the wishes of their electorate
<i>c) Party soldier</i>	Local politicians are obliged to act according to the wishes of their party
Patron	Local politicians are obliged to act according to the agreements associated with protective personal relationships established for ‘mutual benefit’.
Performer	Local politicians are obliged to act according to what contributes to outcomes and the quality of what local democracy produces.
<b>Sanctions</b>	<i>Associated with the OR ELSE or rules</i>
Vote	Elections provide a mechanism that the public can use to punish local politicians if they think they are not fulfilling their roles as they should.
Office	Politicians can agree the suspension or removal of office or the reduction of the benefits associated with it.
Policy	Politicians can agree the suspension or removal of office and the influence associated with that office.