

Field-Configuring Events  
and Institutional Theory –  
Common ground?  
Common problems?

Guido Möllering  
Jacobs University Bremen

1. FCEs assemble in one location actors from diverse professional, organizational, and geographical backgrounds.
2. FCEs' duration is limited, normally running from a few hours to a few days.
3. FCEs provide unstructured opportunities for face-to-face social interaction.
4. FCEs include ceremonial and dramaturgical activities.
5. FCEs are occasions for information exchange and collective sense-making.
6. FCEs generate social and reputational resources that can be deployed elsewhere and for other purposes.

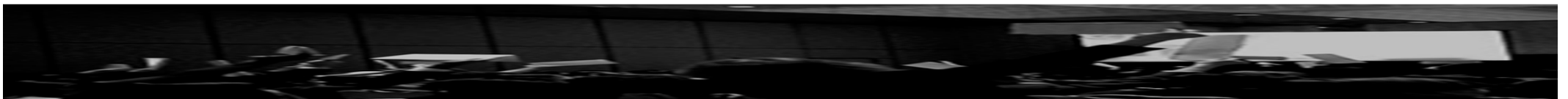
## THEORETICAL ORIGINS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

The study of field configuring events must be situated in the context of ongoing research addressing the growth and evolution of institutional, organizational, and professional fields (Davis and Marquis, 2005). Early institutional theorists devoted little attention to the origins of fields, and explicitly excluded human agency as a factor in their formation. More recently, scholars have turned their attention to the emergence of institutions and fields (Farjoun, 2002; Meyer et al., 2005). Thus far the new research suggests that fields begin as agglomerations of individuals, groups, and organizations that meet sporadically at first, and then come into contact with increasing frequency. These contacts foster competitive and collaborative interactions, and depending on the specific local circumstances and individual strategies they can trigger field evolution (Powell et al., 2005).

At some point early in the evolution of a field, the density and intensity of participants' interactions reach critical thresholds at structural and cognitive levels (Meyer et al.

# An organization theory perspective

Organizational Field	(Structure)
Organizing / Configuring	(Practice)
Organized Event	(Agency)

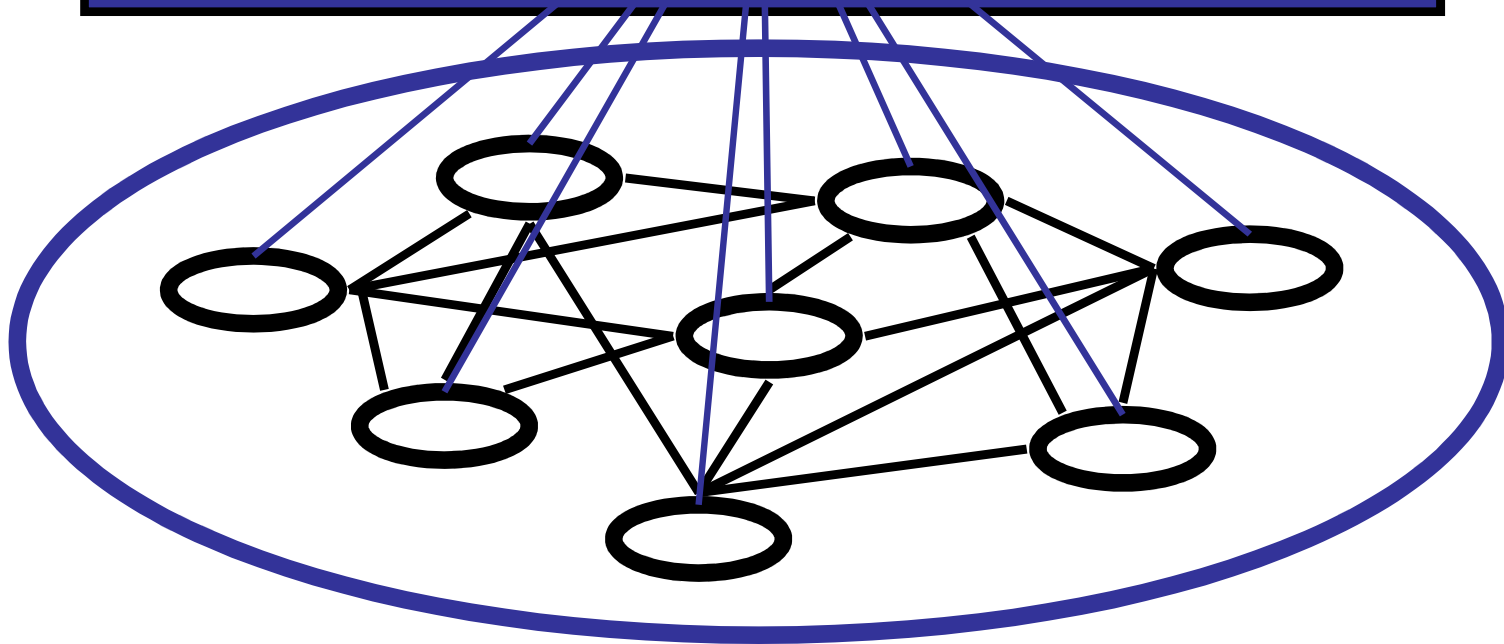


# Organizational Field 101

FCEs "encapsulate and shape..." (Lampel and Meyer 2008: 1026)

meaning system: institutionalized rules

*regulative* | *normative* | *cultural-cognitive*



Möllering 2011: 461 based on DiMaggio & Powell 1983: 143, Scott 1994: 207f, 2008: 44ff

# Organisational Field Definitions

DiMaggio/Powell (1983)

“By organizational field we mean those organizations that, in the aggregate constitute a recognized area of institutional life: key suppliers, resource and product consumers, regulatory agencies, and other organizations that produce similar services or products.”

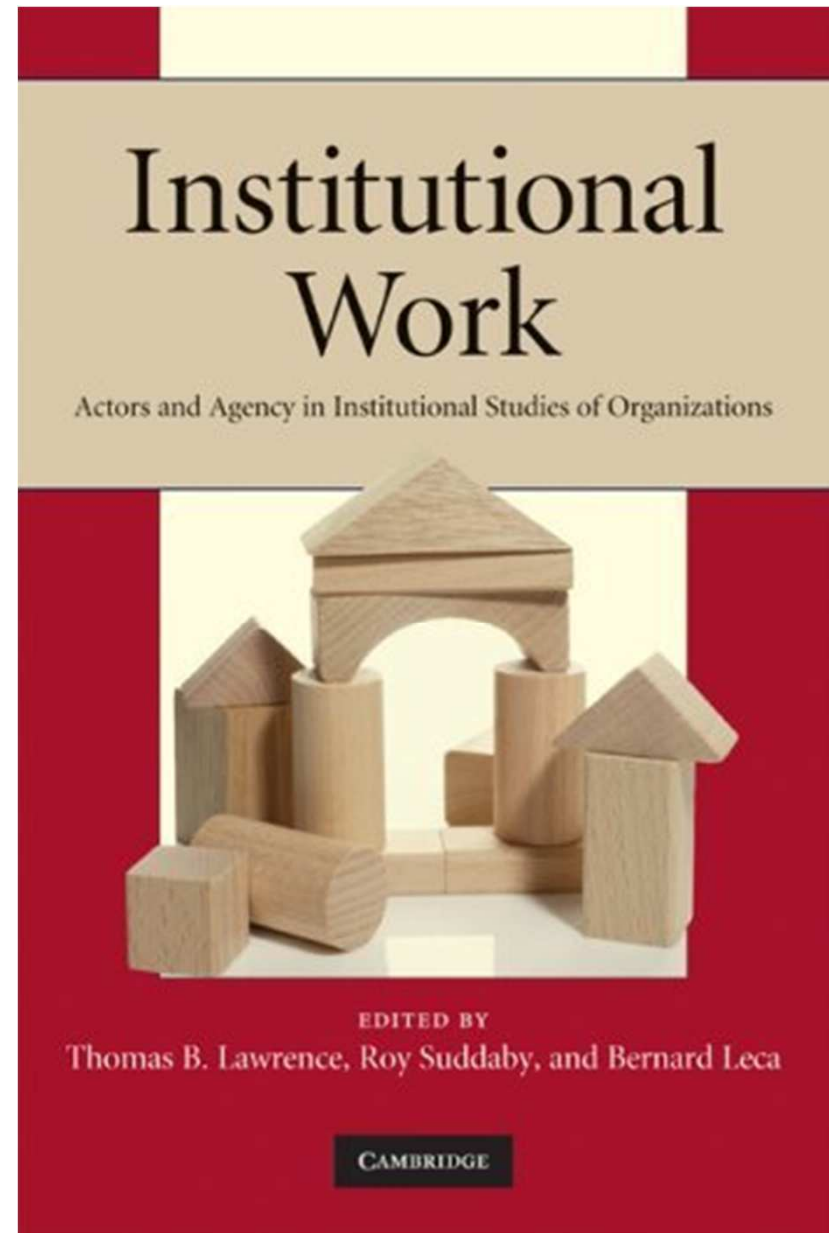
Scott (1994)

“The notion of field connotes the existence of a community of organizations that partakes of a common meaning system and whose participants interact more frequently and fatefully with one another than with actors outside the field.”





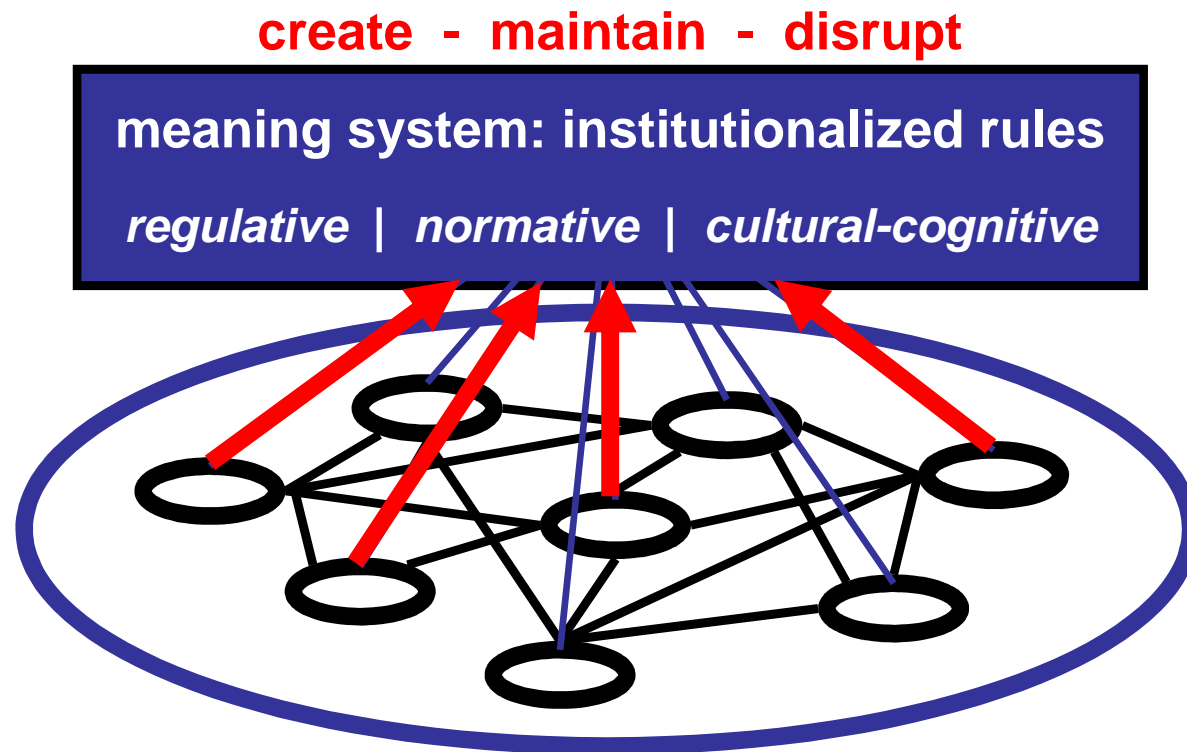
2006



2009

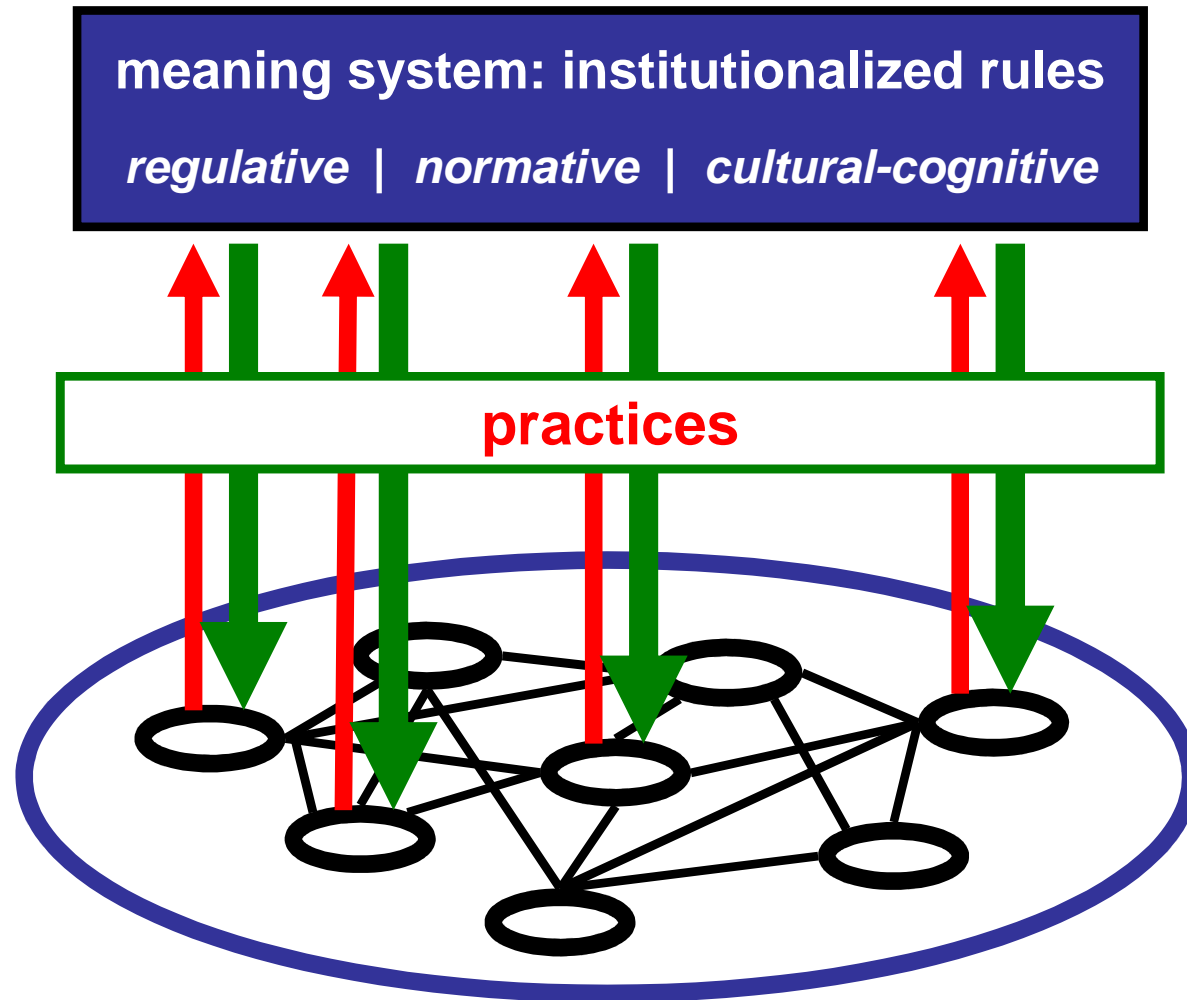
# Institutional Work 101

“The **purposive action** of individuals and organizations aimed at **creating, maintaining** and **disrupting** institutions.”  
(Lawrence and Suddaby 2006: 215)



# Focus on Practices

Practices at  
FCEs?





# So what about agency?

*Which orientation is prevalent at FCEs?*

“The **purposive action** of individuals and organizations aimed at **creating, maintaining** and **disrupting** institutions.”  
(Lawrence and Suddaby 2006: 215)

## Emirbayer and Mische (1998)

- Iteration (habit, routine) past
- Projectivity (imagination, purpose) future
- Practical Evaluation (judgment, deliberation) present



# What about this heuristic...?

temporal	agentic	institutional
<u>orientation:</u>	<u>purpose:</u>	<u>dimension:</u>
past	maintain	cognitive
present	disrupt	normative
future	create	regulative

**event mode**



**event impact**

*descriptive?*  
*predictive?*



1. FCEs assemble in one location actors from diverse professional, organizational, and geographical backgrounds.
2. FCEs' duration is limited, normally running from a few hours to a few days.
3. FCEs provide unstructured opportunities for face-to-face social interaction.
4. FCEs include ceremonial and dramaturgical activities.
5. FCEs are occasions for information exchange and collective sense-making.
6. FCEs generate social and reputational resources that can be deployed elsewhere and for other purposes.

## THEORETICAL ORIGINS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

The study of field configuring events must be situated in the context of ongoing research addressing the growth and evolution of institutional, organizational, and professional fields (Davis and Marquis, 2005). Early institutional theory devoted little attention to the origins of fields, and explicitly excluded human agency as a factor in their formation. More recently, scholars have turned their attention to the emergence of institutions and fields (Farjoun, 2002; Meyer et al., 2005). Thus far the new research suggests that fields begin as agglomerations of individuals, groups, and organizations that meet sporadically at first, and then come into contact with increasing frequency. These contacts foster competitive and collaborative interactions, and depending on the specific local circumstances and individual strategies they can trigger field evolution (Powell et al., 2005).

At some point early in the evolution of a field, the density and intensity of participants' interactions reach critical thresholds at structural and cognitive levels (Meyer et al.

*event impact =  
generation and  
deployment of  
these resources?*

## What happens *during* events?

Is it (just) sense-making or (really) something 'institutional'?

How are practices at events related to practices outside events and the practice of holding events?



# Research Design: Analyzing an FCE

## Characteristics of FCEs (Lampel & Meyer 2008):

1. “FCEs assemble in one location actors from diverse professional, organizational, and geographical backgrounds.”
2. “FCEs’ duration is limited, normally running from a few hours to a few days.”
3. “FCEs provide unstructured opportunities for face-to-face social interaction.”
4. “FCEs include ceremonial and dramaturgical activities.”
5. “FCEs are occasions for information exchange and collective sense-making.”
6. “FCEs generate social and reputational resources that can be deployed elsewhere and for other purposes.”

## Characteristics of the Fifth NGL Workshop, Pasadena 2001

- Ritz-Carlton Hotel; participants from diverse disciplines, firms, and countries
- Two days plus some pre- and post-conference meetings
- Receptions, poster session, meals, private appointments
- Luxurious venue, dinner, prominent survey presentation
- Expert presentations, open discussions, survey
- Final Report, presentation slides (e.g. to push for and justify investment decisions)



# Practices of Dealing with Uncertainty

## Practices of Collective Institutional Work at the 5th NGL Workshop:

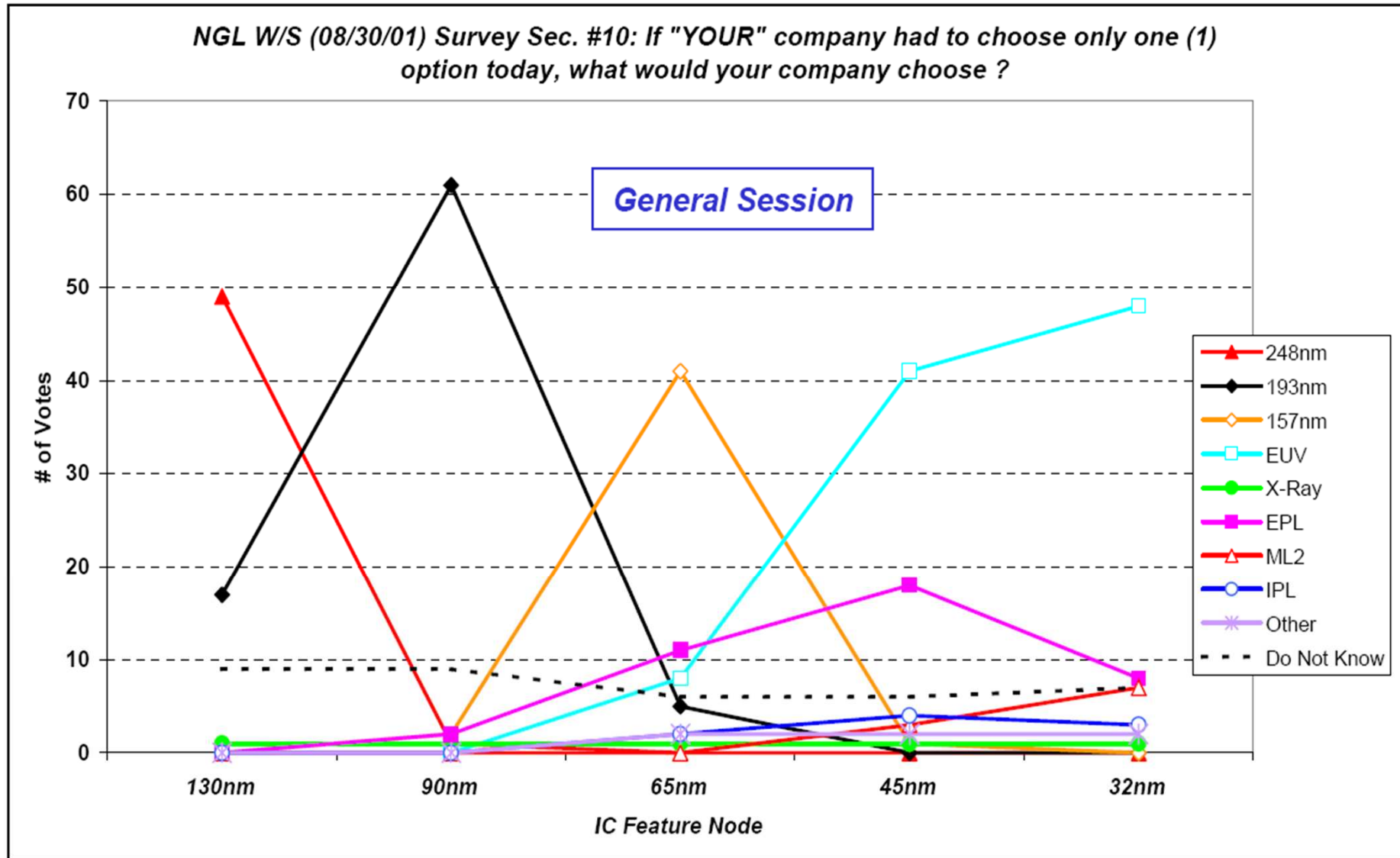
- 1. Bootstrapping:**  
self-starting action, concluding without conclusive evidence
- 2. Roadmapping:**  
assigning dates to events though the future is unknown
- 3. Leader-picking:**  
making others go ahead, following the key actors
- 4. Issue-bracketing:**  
putting problems aside, postponing and excluding

## Underlying mechanisms of dealing with uncertainty:

- **Ignoring** uncertainty
- **Denying** uncertainty
- **Displacing** uncertainty
- **Suspending** uncertainty



# Examples



Source: Report on Sematech NGL Workshop 2001



# What happens *after* events?

to the event 'itself' vs. its 'institutional content'



quickly forgotten  
much talked about  
institutionalized  
abandoned  
???





## Concluding Remarks

Institutional theory categories may enrich the study of events and vice versa

FCE in particular goes well with the recent dynamic approaches in institutional theory as exemplified by 'institutional work'

