# A2 Sociology for AQA

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Hodder Arnold

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*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*
A catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

ISBN-10: 0 340 912 553
ISBN-13: 978 0 340 912 553

Published 2006
Impression number 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
Year 2010 2009 2008 2007 2006



Typeset by Fakenham Photosetting Ltd, Fakenham, Norfolk
Printed in Spain for Hodder Arnold, an imprint of Hodder Education, a member of the Hodder Headline Group, 338 Euston Road, London NW1 3BH

# Acknowledgements

While writing can, at the best of times, be a solitary experience, a number of people have helped me through the long, dark, winter months.

On a personal level, I want to recognise the help and support of:

Julia, my wife.
Anne and John, my parents.
Keith and Kevin, my brothers.

On a professional level I'd like to thank everyone at Hodder who's been involved in some way in the production of the text. In particular, I'd like to acknowledge the help (and patience) of Colin Goodlad, Matthew Sullivan and Matthew Smith (the person responsible for originally getting this show on the road).

On both a personal and professional level I'd also like to acknowledge (and thank) Tony Lawson for his contribution to the text. I'd like to think it's a much better effort for his able assistance.

Finally, to paraphrase the mighty Arcade Fire:

Consider this text a tunnel.
Yeah, a tunnel – From my window to yours.
Meet me in the middle, the empty middle ground.
And since there's no one else around,
We'll let our time grow long,
And remember everything we've come to know.

Chris Livesey

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## About This Book

In writing this book we have tried to satisfy two main aims:

**First**, we wanted to retain a sense of continuity between this and our previous (AS) text in terms of both overall structure and scope, mainly for the benefit of those students and teachers who've used the AS text in their first year of the A-level course. In terms of structural continuity, therefore, the general layout will be familiar to anyone who has used **AS Sociology for AQA** (although it's not, of course, necessary to have used this AS text to get the most from the A2 text). More specifically, we've once again chosen to tie the text closely to the **AQA Specification** (highlighting, where appropriate, **synoptic links** within and between the A2 and AS Modules) and we've retained the basic structure of the AS text by dividing the sections into two parts: introductory material (**'Preparing the Ground'**) provides a general overview of a section and is broadly aimed at students of all abilities, while more challenging material (**'Digging Deeper'**) is included to both develop the initial material and stretch the more able student.

In addition, we've retained a couple of features we believe worked well in the AS text:

The **Key Word** focus, whereby the text is structured around significant concepts – a system designed to both help students to focus on the most important ideas in a particular area and encourage planned examination answers.

**Integrated exercises** designed to achieve a variety of aims (mainly relating to the development of the interpretation, analysis and evaluative skills required at A2). These exercises involve three main types:

- **Warm-up** exercises appear at the start of a section and are designed to ease students into a topic by getting them to think about it in a way that builds on their existing knowledge. The basic idea here is to identify the knowledge students already possess about a topic or issue, something that provides a foundation for building a more sociological level of understanding. This type of exercise also serves as a whole-class ice-breaker for each new section of the course.
- **Growing It Yourself** exercises are more focused and, in general, they're designed for small group work. They usually require students to generate and discuss information, although, reflecting the increased demand for evaluative skills at this level, many of these exercises require students to make decisions about the information generated through discussion. This type of exercise is normally closely integrated with the surrounding text and is designed to complement student reading and note-taking by requiring

them to reflect on – and expand – the information presented through the text. Each exercise has been designed to flow naturally from the text and generally requires little or no prior preparation by students or teachers. Having said this, some of the exercises take the form of **simulations** that require students to take on various roles as part of the overall discussion process; these, reflecting the fact they are slightly more complex than the standard exercises, require a relatively simple level of prior organisation and preparation.

- **Discussion Points** provide opportunities for students to discuss or debate different ideas – something we felt would be useful to build into the overall design to help students clarify and express their thinking in a relatively structured way. Some of the discussion points are tightly-constructed around a particular issue, while others are more loosely constructed to allow students greater scope for discussion and debate.

In terms of our **second** aim, although structural continuity was important when designing this text, we also wanted to reflect the fact that A2 study involves both greater theoretical and evaluative depth.

In relation to the former we were conscious of the need to strike a balance between classical (Marx, Durkheim, Weber and the like) and contemporary sociological theory (writers such as Luhmann, Baudrillard and Foucault), on the basis that, while it's important for students and teachers to have access to contemporary material, we shouldn't lose sight of the classical origins of sociology (something we feel is generally reflected in the structure of AQA A2 examination questions).

In terms of the latter we decided to add a couple of extra features to the A2 text.

**The Potting Shed** involves questions that reflect the structure of the smaller-mark exam questions (requiring students to 'identify and explain' something, for example). These short, relatively simple, questions have also been designed to help students make **synoptic links** between, for example, A2 and AS modules (once again reflecting the general structure of the smaller-mark AQA exam questions).

**Weeding the Path**: The most significant change between the A2 and AS text, reflecting the fact that A2 study requires students to use evaluation skills more rigorously than at AS, is the addition of clearly-signposted evaluation material. Although such material runs throughout the text (at its most basic, of course, being by juxtaposition) we felt it would be helpful to draw students' attention more specifically to this type of information.

Finally, although this A2 text, like its AS counterpart, is focused around helping students work their way successfully through the AQA A-level Sociology course, we hope we've managed to produce a text that, while informative and challenging to all abilities and interests, is one you will enjoy reading – not only because (we trust) it will help you achieve the best possible grade in your examination but also, more importantly perhaps, because we firmly believe that Sociology is a fascinating subject to study in its own right.

CHAPTER 2

# Power and politics

In this chapter we consider the relationship between *power* and *politics* in a range of ways.

This section introduces the idea of political process by looking at how political behaviour in our society is structured through parties, groups and movements. Subsequent sections develop this idea to include political actions, such as voting, and political ideologies. They also examine the concept of power in terms of its definition and social distribution (which groups have power and why, for example), something that includes an exploration of how ideas about power and politics relate to theories of the role of the modern state.

This opening section, as we've just noted, explores some of the ways in which power is socially organised and exercised through political processes and actions.

## 1. The role of political parties and movements, pressure/interest groups and the mass media in the political process

### WARM-UP: PLAYING POLITICS

The objective of this exercise is to get yourself elected as 'Class President' and to do this you've got to build an alliance by convincing people you are the right person for the job. Your teacher takes the role of 'Head of the Class' – their job is to keep order, time each round and ensure fair play.

**Round 1**: Everyone has ten minutes to recruit fellow students to their cause. This is achieved through negotiation – how you do this is up to you: make promises, convince them through argument, offer them bribes . . . Once someone has agreed to support you, they are part of your alliance and cannot be recruited by other alliances. They should form an orderly group behind their leader and can contribute to the recruitment of others to the alliance.

**Round 2**: If one alliance has 50%+ of class members, they are the winners. If not, the alliance with the least members is eliminated and they return to being unaligned. The remaining alliances have a further five minutes to recruit members.

**Round 3**: This process continues until an alliance reaches the required 50%+ of class members. If this proves impossible, the teacher declares the largest alliance the winner.

**Round 4**: The members of the winning alliance then have five minutes to canvas votes from each other, after which a vote is taken from among the members of the winning alliance. The person with the most votes is declared 'Class President'. In the event of a tie, there are five minutes of

further negotiation. If no winner emerges, your teacher (as Head of Class) will choose the winner.

**As a class**: What issues about 'the democratic process' did this activity raise?

## Preparing the ground: Defining political groups

We can begin by outlining some of the general characteristics of the different types of political groups in our society.

## Political parties

Although the concept of a political party (such as Labour or the Liberal Democrats in the UK) is a familiar one, defining this concept is not particularly straightforward, mainly because parties are complex organisations that potentially take a number of forms. Rather than constructing a specific, *inclusive* definition, therefore, it would be more useful to define this type of organisation in terms of what it sets out to do (its general *functions* in democratic societies). In this respect, we can identify a number of characteristics that *differentiate* parties from other types of political organisation:

- **Power**. Parties are organisations that seek to achieve political power and this, in a democracy, involves fighting elections for control of:
- **Government**. The main objective, in this respect, is to take control of the administration and machinery of government in order to put into practice a particular:
- **Ideology**. Parties function to bring together people who share a particular political philosophy. In addition, since a major objective of parties is to win power (through, for example, democratic means), they also represent ways that ideas are *articulated* (presented to the electorate through the media, for example) in terms of specific policies.
- **Representation**. This takes two broad forms.
  - **Membership**: Party organisations reflect the broad ideological principles of their members (who normally pay a subscription to the party). Members may play a variety of roles within different parties (such as fundraising, policy development, selection of political representatives and so forth). In terms of the latter, therefore, one function of parties is to select candidates – people who represent the party and for whom an electorate votes (or doesn't, as the case may be).
  - **The electorate**: Representation extends, of course, to appealing to like-minded members of the electorate and, in this respect, a party reflects the

**Each of the main UK political parties currently holds a week-long conference attended by delegates, selected by its membership, who may be able to influence the development of party policy – something some find more tiring than others . . .**

broad ideological principles of those who vote for its representatives. It may not necessarily be the case that electors (or indeed party members) share every single aspect of a party's ideological principles – each of the three main UK political parties (*Labour*, *Conservative* and *Liberal Democrat*), for example, contain members with opposing views on the UK's relationship to the European Union.

In terms of representation, parties function as conduits through which both members and voters can potentially influence decision-making in relation to government policy. In addition, parties serve as channels for the interests of a range of other organisations, such as interest groups and new social movements.

## Pressure or interest groups

A different type of political organisation is the:

**Pressure** or **interest group** that **Wilson** (1990) defines as 'organizations, separate from government, that attempt to influence public policy'. The difference (if any) between a *pressure* and an *interest* group is not one we're going to pursue here – although it's sometimes argued that an *interest group* doesn't necessarily try to apply 'pressure' to political parties/governments. **Smith** (1995) suggests the two terms are often used *interchangeably*, mainly because such groups 'seek to represent the *interests* of particular sections of society in order to *influence* public policy making'. Whatever the niceties of the possible difference, if we accept **Smith's** characterisation, a pressure/interest group's main objective is to *influence* the decisions made by political parties (rather than to seek representation and power through elections) and they do this in a couple of ways:

- **Direct action** involves trying to influence government behaviour *directly*, through demonstrations, political events and the like.
- **Indirect action** involves trying to influence the general political philosophy of a party (to persuade a party to adopt a policy that reflects the interests of the pressure group, for example).

A recent example of how some interest groups use a combination of these two forms of action is the *Countryside Alliance*, a pressure group initially formed to try to stop the government banning fox hunting with dogs (unsuccessfully as it turned out – this activity was banned in 2005). Its *direct actions* involved mass public demonstrations and 'political events' (such as interrupting a parliamentary debate), while it also campaigned *indirectly* through the media and the efforts of pro-fox hunting MPs to prevent a ban.

Like the political parties they seek to influence, interest groups reflect a range of political ideas, but we can broadly classify them in terms of two basic types (with a range of associated subdivisions):

- **Sectional or protective** interest groups exist to represent the common interests of a particular social group. An example here might be a trade union or professional association (such as the British Medical Association). Organisationally, sectional groups tend to have members who have direct involvement in the particular

interests being promoted (a relatively *closed membership*).

- **Causal** or **promotional** groups exist to promote a particular *cause* – in other words, they are interest groups representing the interests of the 'neglected or politically unrepresented', something they may do in a variety of ways:
  - **Demonstrations** and **public meetings** can include **direct action** – in 2000, 28 Greenpeace supporters destroyed a field of genetically modified maize as a protest against GM crops – and
  - **Publicity stunts** – *Fathers 4 Justice*, for example, specialised in public events designed to bring its argument (what its members saw as a discriminatory lack of access to their children following divorce) to media and hence public attention.

Organisationally, the general membership/support for this type of group is *more likely* to have an indirect (non-personal) interest in the particular cause being promoted (what's sometimes called an *open membership*), although an exception here might be an off-shoot of this general type, the:

**Episodic group**, an interest group formed to support or oppose a specific cause or issue (such as the proposal to build a new motorway). Once the issue has been resolved, the group disbands.

## The potting shed

**Identify any interest/pressure groups to which you give either direct or indirect support. What sort of involvement do you have with these groups?**

## Social movements

The third type of political 'organisation' we need to think about is the social movement. A 'movement', by its very nature, is not something that can be easily pinned down since, as **Glaser** (2003) suggests, it represents a 'loose community of like-minded people who share a broad range of ideas and opinions'. This type of definition, therefore, covers a range of behaviours, a good example of which might be something like the 'environmentalist movement' – a very broad category of people who, in a variety of ways, are concerned with protecting the physical environment.

**Della Porta** and **Diani** (1999) refine this general idea by thinking about social movements in terms of:

**Informal networks** – the movement as a whole is loosely structured. People come together, at various times, on the basis of:

**Shared beliefs** and **support** for a general set of ideas, usually based around:

**Conflictual issues**, especially, although not necessarily, issues of *national* and *global* significance.

Part of the reason for social movements is that issues of concern to movement adherents/members are either not being addressed by political parties or, if they are, the movement's adherents are strongly opposed to the policies being proposed/enacted. This is one reason why such movements often involve:

**Protest** in a range of forms (such as civil disobedience, demonstrations or publicity stunts). In other words, as **Schweingruber** (2005) puts it, social movements involve: 'Continuous, large-scale, organized collective action, motivated by the desire to enact, stop, or reverse change in some area of society.'

In general, sociologists tend to talk about two basic types of social movement:

- **Old social movements**: OSMs were (and still are, to some extent) involved in what **Barnartt** and **Scotch** (2002) term 'issues of rights and the distribution of resources', classic examples being the *American Civil Rights movement* in the 1960s and the *trade union movement* in the UK. In this respect the prefix 'old' refers to the general focus, behaviour, concern and organisation of these types of movement rather than to the idea that they no longer exist.
- **New social movements**: Unlike their OSM counterparts, **Barnartt** and **Scotch** suggest NSMs are more concerned with 'values (postmodern and post-materialistic), lifestyles, and self-actualization, especially among marginalized groups'. In other words, this type of movement focuses, to use **Anspach's** (1979) phrase, on 'identity politics'.

## The potting shed

**Aside from those just mentioned, identify and briefly explain one example of an old social movement and one example of a new social movement.**

This distinction is theoretically useful because it suggests different broad types of social movement have developed to address different concerns, even though we should be wary, perhaps, of overemphasising possible differences – the 'rights' (OSM) and 'lifestyles' (NSM) distinction is too restrictive, given that many NSMs address 'old problems' like unemployment and poverty. In addition, as **Bottomore** (1991) notes, some forms of new social movement have developed out of – and in some respects alongside – old social movements.

**Ecofeminism**, for example, represents what **Spretnak** (1990) terms 'a joining of environmental, feminist, and women's spirituality concerns' that extend across national/state boundaries. However, this NSM has its origins in (feminist) OSMs of the past, where the emphasis was on women's *rights* (such as the right to vote that created a focus for first-wave feminism in the late nineteenth/early twentieth centuries) and their share of resources, such as 'payment for housework' that featured among some second-wave feminist demands.

## ✻ SYNOPTIC LINK

**Theory and method:** Different waves of feminism are discussed in more detail in relation to modernity and postmodernity.

We can refine this basic categorisation by thinking about social movements generally in terms of:

**Political change**, an idea taken from **Schweingruber** (2005) that involves classifying movements in terms of both the general *level* of change they advocate and the *target* of such change (see table on page 110).

We can explain these different types of movement in the following terms:

- **Alternative**: This type provides an alternative to prevailing social norms. The focus of political *change*, therefore, is on developing different ways of doing things, such as the example we've suggested in the table, of home schooling as an alternative to state schooling.

| Classifying social movements and political change: Schweingruber (2005) | | |
|---|---|---|
| | How much change? | |
| Who is changed? | **Limited** | **Radical** |
| Particular individuals | **Alternative**<br>Home schooling | **Redemptive**<br>Born-again Christians |
| Everyone | **Reformist**<br>Civil rights/women's rights | **Revolutionary**<br>Communism/anarchism |

- **Redemptive** movements focus on 'redeeming others'; in the example we've used, a new form of Christianity focuses on changing people's lives by requiring them to embrace a different form of religious behaviour (a literal interpretation of the Bible, for example).
- **Reformist** movements seek to change society in some way – either, as in the case of the American Civil Rights movement, the relative position of ethnic groups or, as with second-wave feminism, relative gender positions. Change may be far-reaching, but this type of movement doesn't seek the revolutionary overthrow of the existing order. Change, in other words, is *incremental* (one step at a time).
- **Revolutionary** social movements, such as communism or fascism, have as their political objective the overthrow (violent or otherwise) of an existing political order and its replacement by a new and different type of order.

## Growing it yourself: Social movements

**Make a copy of the following table and identify some further examples of:**

| Old social movements | | New social movements |
|---|---|---|
| | Alternative | |
| | Reformist | |
| | Redemptive | |
| | Revolutionary | |

## Digging deeper: The role of political groups

Although we've outlined some basic ideas about different types of political organisation, we need to think about how each relates to the other in terms of the general political process in our society. When we talk about 'the political process' we are implicitly thinking about how, in democratic societies, there exists a:

**Plurality** of political organisations, each pursuing a range of aims and purposes. In addition, we need to think about how each type of organisation impacts on other types of related organisation. Thus **political parties**, as **McKay** (2005) notes, perform a number of roles in terms of their contribution to the political process. These include:

- **Demand aggregation**: Democratic societies contain a variety of groups with different interests to 'promote and defend'. The political party, in this respect, represents an organisation through which these group demands can be brought together (*aggregated*) and expressed, both through the process of elections and control of government and the administration of the state (such as a civil service).
- **Reconciliation**: In a situation where competing interests and political perspectives exist, parties provide a mechanism through which such competition can be *reconciled*, both *within* a particular party (where different factions develop broad agreements on the policy platform they present to the electorate) and *between* different political philosophies (in the sense that these competing interests tacitly agree to engage in the political process, whereby the electorate make the final choice).
- **Government**: One obvious function of parties is to take control of the general machinery of government and, by so doing, provide a (functional) link between government and the governed. This reflects what is sometimes called a:
  - **Social contract theory**, whereby the electorate effectively places politicians and parties in a position of trust (government) and, in return, require politicians to be accountable by submitting, periodically, to a renewal of trust through elections.
- **Political stability**: In this respect, the political process that involves parties and elections contributes to an overall sense of both *political stability* (in that different parties may represent different interests in a relatively orderly way) and *social stability*, in the sense that the orderly operation of politics (free and fair elections, the transfer of power between elected and dismissed governments, and so forth) represents a form of *political socialisation* whereby the perceived legitimacy of the political process also, in turn, is legitimised by people's acceptance of such a process.

Although parties, from this general perspective, are the *main* focus of the political process, other groups contribute in a variety of ways. **Pressure groups**, for example, have a distinctive role to play in that they both support and enhance the political process in ways that are generally outside the scope, role and purpose of parties. In this respect, parties and pressure groups have a:

**Symbiotic relationship** – each gains in some way from their relationship. Parties, for example, may develop ideas and policies

from the input of pressure groups whereas pressure groups may gain political influence for either their members or the interests they exist to represent.

## Functions

From the general position we've outlined, therefore, we can note a number of functions performed by pressure/interest groups in democratic societies:

- **Mediation**: Pressure groups represent an important bridge between government/the state and the interests of relatively disadvantaged or powerless groups (such as the homeless).
- **Agency**: Some groups act as conduits and sounding boards for government policies; as organised representatives of different interests it may be useful for both the government and political parties to consult widely to develop popular policies. Trade unions and business organisations (such as the Confederation of British Industry), for example, perform this role in the political process. They may also, of course, act as originators of political policy for different parties.
- **Opposition**: Some groups function to provide expert advice and information that acts as an 'oppositional force' to political parties (although parties outside government may also play this role). Both explicit pressure groups (such as Greenpeace) and implicit pressure groups (such as the media) play roles that provide 'checks and balances' to political power.
- **Participation**: Our society is sometimes considered to have a 'democratic deficit' in the sense that most people's political participation is limited to voting in (general and local) elections. Involvement in pressure groups, especially on a voluntary basis, serves to cut this deficit and make for a more *active* political process through the involvement of different people at different levels.
- **Education**: By publicising issues (through the media, for example), public awareness and understanding of social problems may be increased.
- **Ideas**: Pressure groups contribute to the overall vitality of the political process, both in terms of originating ideas for parties to consider and in terms of providing a further layer of political diversity. Highly sensitive issues, for example, can be promoted by interest groups in situations and ways that are not necessarily open to parties. Childline, for instance, campaigns against child abuse and bullying.

### Weeding the path

In the same way that not all parties have similar levels of electoral support and access to power, the same is true of pressure groups. We can make a relatively simple distinction, for example, between those groups which exist 'inside the game' (they have *direct access* to politicians and government departments) and those groups which, for whatever reason, exist 'outside the game' (they have little or no access to government). *Access differences*, therefore, affect how such groups operate and, of course, their particular roles in the political process.

**Insider groups**, for example, are usually seen as an integral part of the political process for ruling parties and politicians. Such groups may be able to directly *lobby* significant (politically powerful) politicians

on a face-to-face basis. This 'access to power' gives such groups a potentially powerful advantage, but also blurs the distinction between parties and pressure groups. Also, as **Blumenthal** (2005) has noted, it raises questions of possible 'undue political influence' and corruption – those closest to political power have the potential to use their proximity to further both their own interests and those of powerful (and not necessarily politically representative) groups.

**Outsider groups**, since they have no direct access to government and political power, adopt different techniques of influence. These usually involve attempts to publicise their particular area of interest by and through the media – the former in terms of advertising campaigns, for example, and the latter in terms of 'creating media events', such that the group's message will be reported (obvious examples here being political demonstrations, publicity stunts and various forms of 'direct action').

## The media

**Besley et al.** (2002) identify some conventional ways the media contribute to the political process in terms of:

- **monitoring** the activities of political parties, groups and factions
- **reporting** political activities and events and, by so doing, encouraging public participation in the political process
- **interpreting** the significance and meaning of various forms of political behaviour
- **informing** the political process by performing a 'surveillance role' that makes politicians:
- **accountable** and responsive to the electorate.


**Two forms of outsider protest that created interest in the UK media in 2005**
**Anti-fox hunting**


**Pro-fox hunting**

In other words, the role of the media in the political process is that of overseeing behaviour in the political sphere. This general role, however, is not necessarily a politically neutral one. It involves, for example, three distinct processes:

- **Sorting** refers to the different kinds of information presented to the public. This might include *positive spins* on particular policies, politicians and groups, just as it might involve *negative* coverage and perceptions. This process itself can,

therefore, be significant in terms of the type of information the media are able (or willing) to place in the public domain.

- **Discipline** refers to the extent to which the media are able to 'act independently' of political controls – both *overt* (in the sense of *censorship*) and *covert* in terms of the particular relationship different media forms have with parties and groups. The nature of this relationship may result in favourable political coverage, negative coverage or, indeed, no coverage at all.
- **Salience**: Although *news agendas* are often set by events (war, natural disasters and so forth), there are many times when they are not and *salience* refers to the way different issues are presented or ignored within different media. Some types of story/information, do, of course, have different levels of salience at different times in the political process, but the significant point here is the role of media representatives and organisations in 'setting the political agenda' (deciding, in effect, what issues are – and are not – politically significant).

## ✻ SYNOPTIC LINK

**Mass media:** Issues relating to the role and effect of the mass media in modern societies are discussed throughout Chapter 3 in the AS book.

**Social movements** tend to appear towards the bottom of any 'hierarchy of significance' when we consider the general political process, mainly because, of all political organisations, these are generally the least organised in terms of their political structure. Unlike parties, pressure groups and the media, social movements tend, almost by definition, to be loose-knit 'groups' of like-minded individuals without an obvious organisational structure (although, as we've seen, there are exceptions to this rule). In this respect, many social movements represent 'mobilisations of ideas' which are either picked up or rejected by more structured political agencies.

Historically, therefore, social movements have been portrayed in terms of their:

**Pre-political** functions (in the sense of not being politically organised in the way parties and interest groups are organised to either directly exercise political power or influence how it is distributed). In addition, OSMs (such as trade unions) have been conceptualised in terms of how they are generally:

**Integrated** into conventional political processes and organisations. Trade unions in our society, for example, have moved from (illegal) workplace representation of the working classes in the nineteenth century, through sponsorship of a 'working class, socialist' political party (*Labour*) to their current role as, arguably, a form of interest group for their members. Conventionally, therefore, the role of social movements in the political process is seen in terms of:

**Dissent**. Such movements have, for example, historically developed to 'fill a political vacuum' by providing 'channels and voices' for a range of social groups (the working classes through trade unions, alternative sexualities through the gay liberation movement, women through feminist movements, and so forth).

In this respect, one function of OSMs (in particular) has been:

**Representation** by providing an outlet for

the 'politically marginalised' – those who, for whatever reason, have been 'pushed to the political margins' in terms of how their ideas and interests are represented (or not, as the case may be) by parties and pressure groups. Such movements have also represented:

**Mechanisms for change**, both in the sense of providing alternative sources of political dissent, ways of living and associating, and so forth, and in terms of the generation of 'new ideas' and 'ways of seeing' the world.

## Preparing the ground: New political processes

Thus far we've presented a fairly conventional picture of the political process in democratic societies – one that involves seeing the role of political organisations in terms of their general objectives (either achieving political power through government or exerting influence on parties and government). In this respect we've characterised the political process as:

- **Pluralistic** in that it involves a number of broad organisational forms (parties, pressure groups and movements), sub-divided into competing groups (in the UK for example, there are three main parties, plus a range of smaller nationalist and other groups, represented in Parliament).
- **Hierarchical** in the sense that each organisational form is differentially placed in terms of its access to government-based forms of power and influence. Thus parties have *direct access* to political power whereas interest groups, the media and social movements have *mediated access* (their power comes from the ability to influence the behaviour of parties and governments).
- **Functional** in that 'the political process' can be represented as a *system* within which different groups develop different (related and interlinked) roles that contribute to the overall maintenance and reproduction of the political system.

## Social change

However, although this gives us one picture of the political process, it's possible to argue that the relatively recent development of new forms of social movement may change the way we view this process, in the light of two major social changes:

- **Focus**: First, we can argue that NSMs represent a significant political development, one that has important ramifications for the general political process in that, as we've suggested, their focus is both:
  - **Individualistic**, in the sense of a preoccupation with the development of identity-based politics, and
  - **Global**, in the sense of representing movements capable of transcending national forms of political organisation and process. In other words, rather than simply seeing political processes in *national* terms, we should consider how the ability of NSMs to reach out to people across national (*nation state*) borders impacts on the type of political process we've described.
- **Milieu**: The general idea here is that the *economic*, *political* and *cultural setting* within which traditional forms of party,

pressure group, social movement and media have developed historically is undergoing a *transformation*. In particular, two related ideas have significant implications for our understanding of both the way the political process is organised and the respective roles of different types of political organisation:

- **Post-industrial society**: The idea that economic changes in the structure of our society (and the growth of a 'new middle class') have far-reaching consequences for both the theory and practice of politics.
- **Globalisation**: In particular, the development of worldwide communication networks (such as the internet) – potentially open to all – that cut across boundaries of time and space. As **March** (1995) puts it: 'The Internet is no mere static repository of information, but a place of action . . . The reachable "audience" grows daily. This opportunity and ability to influence public opinion should not be ignored.'

## ✻ SYNOPTIC LINK

**Theory and method/Stratification and differentiation:** The concept of post-industrial society is explained in more detail in terms of modernity and postmodernity and applied in relation to contemporary changes in the class structure.

In short, the argument we need to explore is whether the 'rules of the political game' are changing since, as **Patten** (2000) puts it, 'The defining feature of contemporary social movements is their commitment to cultural transformation at the level of social relations and political identities'. The question here, therefore, is, are we experiencing a form of *postmodern politics* where the ideas, activities and behaviours of new social movements have far-reaching consequences for both national and international political processes?

## Digging deeper: New political processes

NSMs are a significant development for our conceptualisation and understanding of the political process in late/postmodern societies on a number of levels.

**Issues**: NSMs embrace a diversity of issues traditionally viewed in terms of categories such as class, gender and ethnicity (from antiglobalisation, through sexualities, to issues of black power and beyond). However, what sets them apart (as *new* social movements) is a broadly different interpretation of:

**Power**, embraced and expressed in terms of ideas like identity and lifestyles, as opposed to the conventional concerns of OSMs, parties and pressure groups with *economic* forms of power.

**Process**: The focus on *universal* issues (such as the meaning of identity) is not coincidental in that it has arisen at the moment when instantaneous global communication systems have started to develop that facilitate 'connected networks' of like-minded individuals across the globe. In this respect, **Carroll** (1992) suggests the significance of NSMs for our understanding of the political process is rooted in the idea that they represent movements ' . . . through which new identities are formed, new ways of life are tested, and new forms of community are prefigured'. These ideas impact on the nature of NSM:

- **Organisation**. As we've suggested, one distinguishing feature of NSMs is their lack of formal organisational structure, something that's important in the context of conventional forms of political process – governments, for example, generally relate to *organisations*, which effectively means NSMs are excluded (through both choice and circumstance) from this process. However, although NSMs may lack conventional organisational structures, this doesn't mean they are 'disorganised'; rather, they frequently function, as we've just noted, in terms of:
- **Decentralised networks**. As **Patten** (2000) puts it, NSMs are constructed around 'non-institutionalized networks of groups and individuals' – a significant idea in terms of the role played by the *media* in the development of NSMs.

Thus far we've considered the role of the media in terms of how information is *produced* (by corporate organisations, for example) and *consumed* by a general population. However, when dealing with NSMs, two significant factors come into play.

First, the role of the media, in terms of how it can be *used* by the consumer to make communication easier, and second, how developments like the internet facilitate different organisational forms. As **March** (1995) notes: 'Community activists get together regularly online . . . to connect at some shared level. Meeting in cyberspace can be an activist's "ultimate conference call" . . . new social movements, by the nature of their organizational structure, are perfect candidates for using this forum . . . Issues and concerns can be brought to the attention of both the local, and global, community.'

## Discussion point: Making the connection

Imagine (it's easy if you try) you were starting a new social movement.

- How could you use new technologies, such as the internet, both to spread your important message across the globe and to make contact with people who share your political message?

What are the general advantages and disadvantages of a political movement developing in this way?

The organisational structures of NSMs reflect, in turn, how they operate in terms of both:

- **Physical operation**, using modern communication methods (such as mobile phones and computers) in a variety of ways to connect the various disparate 'members' of NSMs
- **Mental operation** in terms of what **Welsh** (2001) calls 'agents of innovation and transformation inescapably within but apart from systems'.

In other words, the various ways NSMs operate – both in terms of how they mobilise for political ends and the aims of political action – are indicative of a different form of 'political operation' located within a different form of political process. The objective is not merely to control or influence 'governments'; rather, it is to develop new and different forms of association, relationship and political practice, an idea that leads **Cox** (1996) to argue we should move 'beyond the language

of social movements' to embrace the idea of NSMs as:

**Counter-cultures**, whose objective is not simply to influence *national* political processes, but rather to influence the development of *globally networked* political processes that address 'global problems' – environmental destruction, poverty, slavery, sweated labour, disease, and so forth.

This idea dovetails neatly with **Melucci's** (1996) argument that we should view NSMs not as discrete, 'issue-based' movements, but rather as:

**Networks within networks** – in other words, movement 'members' (or activists) are generally buying into a 'political worldview' rather than a particular issue (such as 'Saving the Whale').

While an interest in such issues frequently represents a way into political networks, once inside, the individual is linked into a wide range of related issues and areas. 'Activists', as **Wall et al.** (2002) note, 'have multiple concerns . . . In our study we found . . . an activist in the anti-capitalist network was also a key organizer of a protest against the imprisonment of asylum seekers.'

## Weeding the path

Notwithstanding the potential significance of this 'new development' in the behaviour and scope of social movements, not everyone shares this general interpretation. **Patten** (2000), for example, suggests:

**Differences** between NSMs and traditional forms of pressure-group behaviour should not be overstated. Although usually they may use different methods and be organised differently, their general objectives (to influence national government policies) frequently converge.

**Democracy**: NSMs are not automatically 'more democratic' than other types of political organisation. They can, for example, 'reflect specific interests just as easily as parties and pressure groups'.

**Representation**: The particular role of NSMs in the political process is open to interpretation. **Galipeau** (1989), for example, has argued that we should view 'parties, pressure groups and social movements' as the central core of different forms of representation. Whereas parties and groups operate at:

**Institutional levels** of representation ('elections, parliament and bureaucratic networks' of state policy-making), social movements operate at the level of the:

**Non-institutionalised margins** of the political process – they represent innovative political organisations that, as **Patten** (2000) notes, ' . . . aim to alter how we think about politics, political identities and political interests'.

In this sense, the three types of political organisation we've outlined (parties, pressure groups and social movements) exist in a form of 'functional interdependence'; while each may perform different roles, these are, in the greater scheme of things, functionally connected as separate, but significant, aspects of the overall political process in democratic societies. **Patten**, however, disputes this interpretation when he argues that parties and movements should be seen as being in competition with each other, for two main reasons:

- **Engagement**: New social movements frequently attempt to influence national political processes and parties – they do not simply 'bypass' these significant political channels of influence.

- **Transgressive politics**: Just as new social movements may attempt to form political parties, established parties and pressure groups have responded (albeit more slowly, perhaps) to the 'changing national and global political landscape' by focusing on issues, such as environmentalism and identity politics, that have conventionally been the preserve of new social movements.

## Moving on

In this opening section we've looked at the political process in terms of the relationship between different types of political organisation and how they attempt to influence this general process. In the next section, therefore, we need to look more closely at the object of this process – power, its social distribution and the role of the state.

# 2. Explanations of the nature and distribution of power and the role of the modern state

This section focuses on the concept of power, considered in two main ways. First, we look at how it is defined, and second, at explanations for its distribution. As a way of thinking about how these ideas can be applied we then explore theories of the role of the modern state.

We can start by suggesting that power is something with which we are all familiar, mainly because we experience it in terms of how our behaviour – and that of others – is controlled.

### WARM-UP: EXERCISING POWER

This exercise explores our experiences by thinking about who has power, how they use it and, most importantly perhaps, the source of their power.

In small groups:

- Identify some of the people and organisations that exercise power over you (your teachers and school, for example). For each, give an example of how their power is used. (Can people, for example, make you do things? If so, how?)
- Identify the source of their power. (Are they, for example, physically stronger than you?)

As a class, bring together your ideas and decide:

- Who has power in our society?
- Can we construct 'categories of power'? (Are there, for example, different types of power?)

## Preparing the ground: The nature of power

We can begin by noting two ideas:

- **Politics**: Although we tend to think about 'politics' in terms of political parties and governments, sociologists spread the net wider by thinking about politics in terms of how *power* is organised and employed in relation to *decision-making* – sometimes on a grand scale (such as the decision to declare war), but more frequently on a relatively minor, day-to-day scale (such as choosing our friends).

Political behaviour, therefore, extends far deeper into the fabric of our lives than the activities of politicians.

- **Power**: If politics involves decision-making then power is the vehicle through which it is expressed. It represents, in crude terms, the way to 'get things done' – or as **Dugan** (2003) puts it, 'the capacity to bring about change'. **Giddens** (2001), for example, suggests power involves 'the ability of individuals or groups to make their own concerns or interests count, even where others resist', while **Weber** (1922) puts this more forcibly: 'Power is the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his [*sic*] will despite resistance.'

## Types

Power and politics, therefore, are closely related in that politics is the means by which power is given *shape*, *expression* and *direction*, which suggests power needs to be understood in:

**Relational terms** – how people use it to control or influence the behaviour of *others*, or, as **Arendt** (1970) expresses it: 'Power corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert ["as a group"].' This leads us to think about different *types* of power since there are many different ways people 'act together' (willingly or unwillingly) to bring about change. **Boulding** (1989), for example, identifies 'three faces of power':

- **Coercive** power involves threat – someone obeys because they fear the consequences of disobeying, a situation where someone has *power over* others.
- **Exchange** involves the power of negotiation ('if you do something I want, I will do something you want'). This form represents *power with* others because it is exercised to mutual benefit.
- **Integrative** power can be expressed by thinking about the power of love – if someone loves you they may be willing to do things to help or please you – neither threat nor exchange is necessarily involved. This form has further possibilities, of course. It may involve an individual with the *power to* accomplish some desired goal on the basis of their personal abilities or characteristics (physical or mental).

### The potting shed

**Identify and briefly explain one example, from any area of the Specification, of each of Boulding's faces of power.**

### Digging deeper: The nature of power

We can think about power in a more detailed way in terms of the distinction between:

**Power** and **authority**. **Weber's** (1922) classic definition is always worth considering here, mainly because it distinguishes between two types of power: *coercion* and *consent* (*authority*):

- **Coercion** means people are forced to obey under threat of punishment. Obedience, therefore, is based on *threat* (real or imagined).
- **Authority**, however, is where people obey because they believe it right and proper to conform.

**Weber** distinguished three types of authority:

- **Charismatic**: People obey because they *trust* the person issuing the command, something that stems from the personal qualities of leadership they see in that person. A charismatic individual may be someone *exemplary* or *heroic* (a religious leader or army commander, for example), or they may simply be someone in our life we admire and want to please.
- **Traditional**: This type of authority is based on custom – 'the way things have always been done'.
- **Legal**: People give orders (and expect they will be obeyed) because their *position* in an *authority structure* (a school, workplace or army battalion, for example) gives them this power. This is sometimes called *bureaucratic power* because it's based on the existence of *rational rules* and *procedures* that apply to all members of an organisation; orders are to be obeyed only if they are relevant to the situation in which they are given. A teacher, for example, could reasonably expect the order to 'Complete your

## Growing it yourself: Types of power

**Identify further examples of each of Weber's four types of power (we've given you one to start):**

| Coercive | Charismatic | Traditional | Legal/Rational |
|---|---|---|---|
| Police officer | Rock singer | Parent | Teacher |

**In the above you will probably have discovered that many people/occupations could fit into different categories (a police officer, for example, exercises both *legal* and *coercive* power). This is because power can potentially take different forms, depending on the *context* in which it's exercised, an idea reflected in:**

**Dimensions of power. Lukes (1990) defines power in terms of *decision-making* and suggests we can understand it in terms of three dimensions, involving the ability to:**

- **Make decisions – teachers, for example, have power because they can decide what their students do in the classroom.**
- **Prevent others making decisions – a further dimension is the ability to stop others making decisions. In the classroom a teacher can stop their students doing things they might like to do (such as gaze out of the window).**
- **Remove decision-making from the agenda – this involves the ability to prevent others making decisions because you have the power to convince them no decisions are necessary; change, in other words, is not up for discussion. This suggests the powerful are able to *manipulate* the powerless in ways that prevent challenges to their power (the powerless, in effect, are unaware of any need for change).**

homework by Thursday' to be obeyed by a student in their class. However, they couldn't reasonably expect the student's parent to obey this order. Unlike the other types, which exist in all known societies, legal authority was, for **Weber**, a characteristic of – and the dominant form in – modern societies.

## ✻ SYNOPTIC LINK

**Families and households: Lukes'** dimensions of power can be applied to an understanding of gender relationships within families (think about who has the power to make decisions in this institution, for example).

**Lukes'** third dimension of power links into the final definition we're going to consider since, for someone like **Foucault** (1980, 1983), power in *contemporary societies* has a couple of features that differentiate it from power in *past societies*.

**Opacity**: Power is 'difficult to see' in the sense that we are *unaware* of the power others (especially governments) hold over us. This is not because the nature of power itself has changed – coercive and authoritative forms still exist, for example – but rather that the way we *experience* and *think* about power in our everyday existence has changed.

In the past, for example, control was largely based on 'raw (coercive) power' – from a monarch exercising supreme power to prison systems that maintained total control over the body. In contemporary societies raw power still exists, but its form has been transformed into increasingly subtle modes of domination, from the expansion of technological (*overt*) surveillance such as CCTV to the ultimate form of *covert* surveillance, the construction of knowledge and language itself, which **Foucault** expresses in terms of:

**Discourses**. These are systems of belief that control behaviour by controlling how we *think* about the world, and these are constructed around:

**Knowledge** or beliefs about the 'nature of things'. For example, knowledge in contemporary Western societies is constructed around *binary oppositions* – we 'think about things' in terms of what something *is* ('truth', for example) and what it *is not* ('falsity'). These oppositions are all around, from male and female, through good and evil, to law-abiding and criminal.

## ✻ SYNOPTIC LINK

**Theory and methods:** The idea of binary oppositions is, according to postmodern writers, a fundamental feature of modernist thinking.

**Language**: This is how we express our thoughts about things. If we believe in ideas like male and female, this conditions how we behave as males and females.

### The potting shed

A simple example to illustrate this idea is to think about the word 'terrorist'. Describe the images and ideas that pop into your head when you read this word.

**Foucault** argues that power works 'through people rather than on them', in that discourses specify *moral ideas* about

right and wrong which are, of course, powerful, if subtle and opaque, forms of control.

**Pervasiveness**: For **Foucault**, 'power is everywhere' – it's not just something, as **Gauntlett** (1998) notes, 'possessed by certain people and not . . . by others'. Rather, power works through people in the sense that it is both:

- '**Out there**' – created through our relationships, both *personal* (family and friends, for example) and *impersonal* (how the government attempts to control our behaviour) – and
- '**In here**' – such as how we exercise control over our own behaviour.

Power, therefore, is not something embedded in social structures ('I am male, therefore I have power over you'); rather, it resembles a:

**Network**, embedded in individual belief systems (the way we see, think about and make sense of the world) that spread outwards to encompass all aspects of daily life. People become, in other words, their own police, patrolling and controlling perceptions of normal and abnormal, for example. Power, therefore, is like a net that spreads ever further until we are completely surrounded, by which point the net is closed and we see no way (and, for most of us, no reason) to break free.

## ✻ SYNOPTIC LINK

**Crime and deviance:** These ideas link to policing and surveillance in modern societies. Refer, for example, to both **Cohen's** (1979) ideas about the extension of social controls (how the 'net widens', for example) and **Shearing** and **Stenning's** (1985) work that uses the example of Disney World to demonstrate modern forms of surveillance.

We can develop ideas about the nature and distribution of power by relating it to a concrete example – that of the *role of the state* and, to do this, we need first to define 'the state'.

## Preparing the ground: The modern state

We can begin by thinking about a basic definition:

**The State** refers to a set of *organisations* and *institutions* related to the function of government (how order is created and maintained, for example). In this respect, the *state* 'exists' in terms of:

**Practices**; in other words, we can define it by what it *does* in terms of, for example:

- **Social order**: The modern state creates and maintains order in a number of ways, both explicitly, through the police and armed forces, and implicitly, by creating the conditions under which people can go about their daily lives in relative safety and security.
- **Policy-making**: This relates to something like the creation of laws which, in democratic societies, apply equally to all.

**Services**: Modern states are, at various times, responsible for a range of public services (and private services paid for by the state). These include:

- **Direct services**: These might involve something like those provided, until recently in the UK, by *nationalised*

(state-owned) industries. In the 1970s, for example, the state owned coal mines, car manufacturers, gas provision and telecommunications. In the 1980s, the Conservative government *privatised* (sold into private ownership) these examples of nationalised industries.

- **Indirect services**: A range of things could be included here, depending on how widely you want to draw the distinction between ownership and control. The state, for example, provides (compulsory) education and a National Health Service, employs social workers and traffic wardens (through local government), and so forth.

**Revenue**: In the UK, for example, the state raises a range of taxes (from income tax and national insurance, through VAT, to corporation tax on business profits). State revenue is used for a variety of purposes (from paying politicians and civil servants to building prisons).

**Representation**: This can be expressed in two basic ways:

- **Internal**: Modern democratic states provide a system of political representation whereby people and their views are politically represented (in Parliament, for example).
- **External**: This refers to the various ways a state represents itself to other states. These relationships take a number of forms, from trade agreements, through treaties, to wars.

## Digging deeper: The modern state

Defining the state in terms of 'what it does' points us towards an initial problem: the idea of the state having an:

**Ambiguous status**: – that is, the state is an *abstract concept* in the sense that it has no distinctive *empirical reality* (we can't, for example, point to something concrete called 'the state'). This reflects, according to **Jessop** (1990), a central paradox, namely that 'the

## Growing it yourself: What has the state ever done for you?

**Construct the following table and identify examples of state functions:**

| Social Order | Policy-making | Services | Representation | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | Internal | External |
| Traffic wardens | Compulsory education | Doctors | Members of Parliament | Treaties |
| **Further examples?** | | | | |

state is both part and whole', in the sense that it is both:

- **Separate** from wider society (since if it wasn't we couldn't talk about its distinctive functions) and
- **Integral** to society – 'the state' and 'the society' are not mutually exclusive entities since, as **Jessop** notes, the state is 'peculiarly charged with responsibility for maintaining the integration and cohesion of the wider society'. As **Giddens** (1985) puts it: 'The state is both part of and "over" society.'

## Ambiguity

Although this idea may be a little difficult to take on board (it's a bit like the idea that someone can be their own parent), it's important because it suggests the state may have an:

**Ambiguous role**. The question here is the extent to which we can explain the role of the state in terms of:

**Autonomy** – the idea that the state can be studied 'separately' from the rest of society, as an object in its own right. This reflects a belief that the state can, for example, act *independently* of the various political, economic and ideological interest groups in any society. In other words, explanations focus on identifying the *unique characteristics* of the role of the state 'in society'.

**Dependency**, meanwhile, reflects the position that although we can examine the various functions of the state, to explain its role we have to look at wider social processes. A classic representation of this idea, perhaps, is the Marxist argument that 'the state becomes the committee for managing the common affairs of the . . . bourgeoisie'. In other words, the various institutions of the state are considered to be under the domination of a particular (ruling) class and, consequently, represent and favour that class.

In the next part we can develop these ideas by thinking about the distribution of power in:

- **Modernity**: Explanations here focus on some of the traditional ways sociologists have theorised the distribution of power across social groups. We can complement this analysis by suggesting how these different explanations can be applied to the role of the modern state.
- **Postmodernity**: More contemporary social theories have examined the distribution of power in slightly different ways to their traditional counterparts and we need to reflect these differences by thinking about how social processes such as *globalisation* have impacted on both explanations of the distribution of power and the role of the state.

### ✻ SYNOPTIC LINK

**Theory and methods:** Modernity and postmodernity are considered in more detail in this chapter.

We can begin, therefore, by exploring a range of positions that focus on explanations for the distribution of power and the role of the state in *modern* societies.

## Preparing the ground: Pluralism and power

From this position, power in modern democratic societies is held by a variety of:

**Competing groups**, none of which wholly dominates all other groups because checks and balances are built into the general fabric of political life. Political parties, for example, compete for control of the law-making process, while the police and judiciary have a degree of *autonomy* over how such laws are interpreted and applied. Judges may also be able to rule on the legality of different laws. Such societies are, therefore, characterised by a *plurality* of groups with different levels of power and influence, the nature of which is theorised in terms of a:

**Zero** (or **constant**) **sum** capacity – the amount of power in any society is relatively fixed (constant), so an increase in the power of one individual or group must be at the expense of other individuals or groups (hence the idea of a zero-sum totality of power).

For example, teachers have more power than their students within a classroom by virtue of their position in a hierarchical social system (the school). However, if the students decide to disobey their teacher (shout, scream, run riot – the usual stuff) and the teacher can't stop them, this demonstrates a 'constant sum' of power. While the teacher controls the class, they have power and students do not. If, however, the class decides to take control, then they have power and the teacher has lost it.

## The potting shed

**In this situation, what options does the teacher have to take back the power their students have taken? (What other sources of power can a teacher call upon if classroom control breaks down?)**

Unlike *functionalist* positions, pluralists don't need to explain:

**Social order** on the basis of value or norm *consensus* (broad, society-wide agreements) because, they argue, society consists of a range of different:

**Interest groups** which ultimately pursue their own *sectional interests*. In other words, societies consist of groups which compete for power and seek to advance their interests at the expense of other groups. Although this resembles a *Marxist* form of explanation (social classes as massive interest groups, for example), the main difference is in the way interest groups are theorised in terms of:

**Vertical cleavages**. Interest groups contain individuals with characteristics that cut across categories like class, age, gender and ethnicity. As **Robinson** (2001) puts it: 'Class is a *horizontal cleavage*, while ethnicity is a *vertical cleavage* (there will be both workers and capitalists in ethnic groups).' Interest groups, therefore, do not need a common value system since they may be organised to achieve different goals.

Although this may give the appearance of society as potentially a 'war of all against all', stability within the (*pluralist*) system is generated through the role of the state.

## Digging deeper: The pluralist state

A conventional way to describe the role of the state from this position is that of an:

**Honest broker** between various sectional interests in society. Its role, like that of a *referee*, is to mediate between these interests – to balance, for example, the interests of road builders with those of environmental groups. In this respect, we can talk about the idea of a:

**Representative state** – one that, because it reflects the interests of different, competing groups in society, effectively represents the interests of 'the system as a whole'. As **Eriksen** (2004) puts it: 'The state is subordinate to society, in the sense that the character of the state is explained as an effect of the character of society.'

In this respect, the state's major role is the:

**Coordination of social resources**; in other words, the state represents the institutions and machinery of government that serve to maintain order in society in three basic ways:

- **Political order**: In a system characterised by competing groups, the state functions to oversee and maintain an orderly democratic process through, for example, the operation of free elections, an orderly system of political representation (political parties and Parliament, for example) and, where necessary, an orderly transfer of power between different political groups.
- **Legal order**: This involves the regulation of conflict. For example, through the general policy-/law-making process competition is regulated, in both individual terms (laws governing interpersonal relationships) and group terms (laws governing the role and behaviour of business corporations, trade unions, political parties, and so forth).
- **Social order**: The main objective, for the state, is to create and maintain the conditions under which interest groups can successfully compete and, in this respect, the state is characterised as:

  **Neutral** in terms of how it relates to different groups. It doesn't, for example, necessarily favour one group (such as business) over another (such as trade unions). What the state does, however, is act to resolve conflicts between these groups, hence the idea of the state as a

## Growing it yourself: Mediating the problem

**In the wake of a ruthless bombing campaign, the government is under pressure to act. It convenes a policy group to take evidence from two groups to provide suggestions to combat terrorism.**

- **The first – Protect Liberties Act Now (PLAN) – should identify and discuss suggestions that *do not* infringe civil liberties.**
- **The second – Back Action Now (BAN) – should provide suggestions that *will involve curbs* on civil liberties.**

**Divide the class into two groups, one taking the role of PLAN, the other that of BAN. Each group should feed their ideas to the government (the teacher) who may act as an advisor to each group. The government should record each group's arguments and the class as a whole should discuss the strengths and weaknesses of each in the context of finding the best possible solution to the problem.**

*mediating agency* (honest broker) between competing interests.

In general terms, therefore, pluralist perspectives see the state in *dependency terms* – as a set of politically neutral organisations (the police and judiciary, for example) that can, at various times, be *directed* – but *not directly controlled* – by politically organised parties. As **Held** (1989) puts it: 'The state becomes almost indistinguishable from the ebb and flow of bargaining [and] the competitive pressure of interests.'

## Preparing the ground: Elite theories of power

Like pluralism, this general theory involves the idea of competition between different groups for power. However, competition here is between *elites* – powerful groups which can impose their will on the rest of society.

**Elite theory** developed in the early twentieth century through the work of **Pareto** (1916) and **Mosca** (1923), although, as writers like **Greenfield** and **Williams** (2001) have argued, it still has currency in some circles. Both **Mosca** and **Pareto** saw elite rule as:

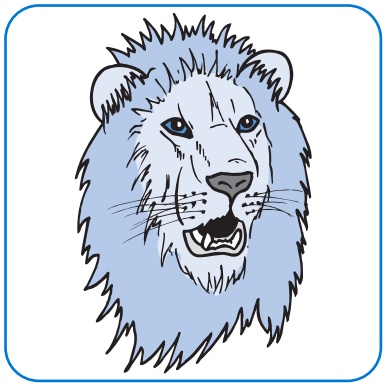
**Desirable** – it was 'right and proper' that those best suited to rule *should* rule, and **Inevitable**, for two different reasons:

**Superior organisational ability** was, for **Mosca**, the key to elite rule because successful elites were those that, because of their superior *internal* organisational abilities, were able to develop the political support needed to take power (either democratically or non-democratically – **Mosca** recognised that the organisational qualities needed to assume power varied from society to society).

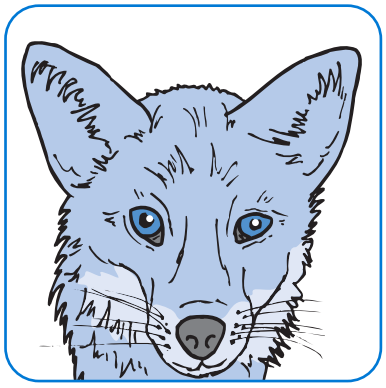
In *democratic* societies, for example, the masses could have some input into the political process through elections. However, **Mosca** considered democracy as little more than a manipulative, legitimating process whereby elites consolidated their power by co-opting the masses (who were born to be led and could be kept 'in their place' through propaganda) to support elite interests.

**Superior personal qualities** (intelligence, education, cunning, and so forth) were the key for **Pareto**, who also saw political change as based around:

**Circulating elites**. An elite group achieved power because of its superior



**Lion elites**
**Rule by force**
**Military regimes**



**Fox elites**
**Rule by cunning and manipulation**
**Democratic regimes**

abilities when compared with other elites and 'the politically disorganised masses'. Elite groups could, for **Pareto**, rise and fall at different times because, after achieving power, elites have a limited life-span – they grow decadent (*corrupt*), isolated, lose their vigour, and so forth, and are replaced by other, more vigorous elite groups, of which **Pareto** identified two basic types: lions and foxes.

## Digging deeper: The elitist state

A basic premise of this type of explanation is that the (political and legal) machinery of the state is under the control of an elite group which is generally *not accountable* to the mass of the population, an idea we can illustrate by outlining three different forms of elite rule:

- **Absolute monarchies**: Although largely characteristic of pre-modern/early modern society, the elite group here is the monarch and his or her trusted advisors. The monarch, in effect, *is* the state in the sense that they assume absolute power and control, through either ideological (a divine right to rule, for example) or political/military means.
- **Totalitarian dictatorships**: These dictatorships (such as Hitler's Germany in the 1930s) involve a slightly different form, namely the:

  **Corporate state**: a strong, centralised state (where control of the machinery of government, from the civil service to the police, judiciary and armed forces, is concentrated in the hands of a small group which exercises absolute power) is used as an *instrument* for the reorganisation of society along whatever lines (usually repressive) are decided by the ruling dictatorship. The general role of the state is one of promoting 'national unity' through a variety of means:

  - **Political**: A ruling elite makes all the necessary political decisions. Political parties are normally banned or replaced by a single party that represents the 'will of the people/nation'.
  - **Economic**: The state is directly involved in some areas of the economy (normally those deemed vital to the 'interests of the nation') and may attempt to influence and regulate the behaviour of private businesses and corporations (by force if necessary).
  - **Ideological**: As with economic activity, the state may take on a direct 'information (propaganda) function' through public media ownership or it may be heavily involved in the regulation/censorship of private media.

  Although this example relates to *totalitarian regimes*, a softer form of *corporate state* occasionally develops in democratic societies when governments co-opt business (and occasionally labour) leaders into the machinery of government in an attempt to solve society-wide problems (such as high levels of unemployment or low levels of consumption).

- **Oligarchies**: An oligarchy is a relatively small group, situated at the top of any organisation, which assumes control over the activities and behaviour of that organisation, a situation that translates into politics in the sense that power is

invested in the hands of a small group which controls and directs the machinery of the state. **Michels** (1911) famously argued that all organisations were oligarchic ('Who says organisation, says oligarchy'), an idea that crystallised around his concept of an:

- **Iron law of oligarchy**, which states that even *democratic organisations* evolve to a point where an elite group eventually dominates and decides the policies of the organisation. **Michels** argued that a political party, for example, is always an '. . . organization which gives birth to the domination of the elected over the electors' – a process that occurs, he argued, for three reasons:
  - **Bureaucracy**: Large-scale organisations (such as governments) are forced to develop rules and routines governing their day-to-day administration.
  - **Use**: Elites are able to control bureaucratic procedures and organisations to consolidate their grasp on power.
  - **Specialisation**: The need for specialised staff to run bureaucratic organisations leads to the inevitable development of hierarchical power structures.

## The potting shed

**Identify and briefly explain one way the British government's cabinet system might be considered an oligarchic system.**

## Preparing the ground: The power elite

A different type of 'rule by elites' theory, developed by **Mills** (1956), focused on how elite groups organise and take power in democratic societies through the control of various social institutions – a process, he argued, that was neither desirable nor inevitable. Since some institutions are more powerful than others (in modern societies an economic elite is more powerful than an educational or religious elite), it follows that groups that controlled important social institutions would hold the balance of power in society. Thus, in his analysis of US society in the 1950s, **Mills** identified three major:

**Power blocs** organised to pursue elite interests:

- **The economic elite**, consisting of large-scale business and industry interests.
- **The political elite**, represented in terms of parties (both government and opposition) which hold similar *ideological beliefs* to each other. In the UK, although the three major parliamentary parties (Labour, Liberal and Conservative) have their own distinct political identities and policies, all hold similar general beliefs about the nature of our society.
- **The military elite**, consisting of the higher levels of military command.

Although each *power bloc* could pursue *separate* – and sometimes *contradictory* – interests, the necessary cooperation between them meant they formed a:

**Power elite** dedicated to the wider interest of maintaining elite status, power and rule. Cooperation between power blocs was also developed through:

**Elite membership**. Powerful individuals could be members of more than one elite at any given time – business leaders could take up political appointments in government and politicians could sit on the boards of major corporations. In this way political power becomes concentrated and political decisions (about whether to go to war, for example) are effectively taken by a small, interlocking, elite minority.

As an example here, **Chatterjee** (2002) notes Richard ('Dick') Cheney was US Defense Secretary during the first Gulf War (1990), became chief executive of Halliburton, 'the world's largest oil services company', in 1995 and took up the post of Vice President in George Bush's first government (2000), a position he still held as of 2006.

## Digging deeper: The power elite and the state

As we've just suggested, the power blocs identified by **Mills** (sometimes called the *military-industrial complex* because of the economic, political and ideological cooperation between the various power blocs) are *autonomous* in the sense that they each have their own separate hierarchical structure and personnel. Where they come together to form a mutually beneficial *power elite*, however, is through the coordinating agency of the state. In other words, a *power elite* forms around the ability of the three major power blocs (economic, political and military) to control *key* social/government institutions. Once this occurs the machinery of the state is used to advance their sectional and communal interests.

Although, for **Mills**, a power elite forms out of the 'convergence of interests' between different power blocs, their members are also connected by shared:

**Social backgrounds**, involving family networks and educational backgrounds (such as, in the UK, the major public schools, Oxford and Cambridge universities and the like), and by:

**Ideological outlooks** that develop from both common class backgrounds and experiences. As **Hadfield** and **Skipworth** (1994), for example, report: 'If you spend ten years of your life . . . in a closed society [public school] where the Cabinet and heads of the armed forces are just ahead of you – Old Boys and Girls – you identify with the powerful.'

## ✻ SYNOPTIC LINK

**Theory and methods:** The instrumental Marxist Ralph **Milliband** (1973) argues that the members of a ruling class are also connected by their 'shared cultural backgrounds'.

This connectivity is not, however, a *causal* factor in the creation of a power elite; rather, it represents a *consequence* of the convergence of interests – members of the various power blocs meet and 'do business' in the normal course of their lives, not the other way round. It is not their common class background that brings them together, but rather their common *power* positions.

This idea leads into a more contemporary take on power elite theory and the role of the state. **Domhoff** (1990), for example, develops the concept of a power elite by adding a *class dimension* to the debate. He argues that the economic power wielded by business leaders in countries like the United States gives this particular power bloc a:

**Leadership role** in government. In other words, their importance to the functioning of both government and the state means their general interests are always paramount in policy-making. Business leaders, in effect, come to resemble a:

**Governing class** in the sense that their economic interests are reflected in the way decisions are made by political leaders.

## Power networks

Although this starts to resemble a traditional Marxist interpretation, there is a major difference. Whereas Marxists generally see the role of the state as being either an:

- **Instrument** of class domination (**Milliband**, 1973, for example) or
- **Relatively autonomous** from a ruling class (**Poulantzas**, 1975, for example)

**Domhoff** (1997) argues that the state is an:

**Autonomous space –** it doesn't actually exist outside of the way different:

**Networks of power** combine, at various times in various societies. In other words, all societies develop what **Mann** (1986) terms four 'overlapping and intersecting sociospatial networks of power' (ideological, economic, military and political) – with the key idea here being *overlap*.

Thus each network represents a *semi-autonomous power bloc* with the freedom to pursue its own particular agenda. Each may, for example, try to pursue its own:

**Sectional interests** at the possible expense of the others. A political elite, for example, may woo the masses by imposing tax increases on private corporations to win votes, just as corporations may develop ways of avoiding taxation, something that may be criticised by ideological institutions such as the media.

The role of the state, according to **Mann**, is to act as a 'space' that regulates the general behaviour of the different networks. Its usefulness, according to **Domhoff**, is in 'laying down rules and adjudicating disputes in specific territories'.

## Preparing the ground: The functions of power

**Functionalist explanations** generally take a different position in relation to the distribution of power in society. **Parsons** (1967), for example, argues that power has two major dimensions:

**Variable-sum**: First, power levels can vary within any society because power is possessed by society as a whole rather than by individuals. Thus, unlike the general Marxist position, some groups do not necessarily become powerful at the *expense* of others. This fits neatly into functionalist concepts of:

- **Social consensus** since, if power levels are *variable*, conflicts do not necessarily arise over competition for power. By cooperating, everyone can gain a share of an expanding overall level of power. Just as levels of economic resources can expand (general living standards rise over time, for example), so too can power as a social resource. Cooperation, therefore, is viewed as a *structural imperative* if a society is to develop and progress.

**Social resources**: Second, power represents the capacity to mobilise resources in society for the attainment of *social goals*. Societies have collective, developmental goals (such

as eradicating unemployment); the more progress made towards these goals, the greater the levels of overall power that come into existence. For example, as the market position of formerly powerless individuals is improved (they find paid work, perhaps), they develop some measure of power over their own lives.

## Dysfunction

Power, therefore, is distributed and exercised in the *general interests of society* as a whole and, although some groups will be more powerful than others, this is necessary (*functional*) because the achievement of *collective goals* requires organisation and leadership which, in turn, is based on power. If some groups become too powerful, however, this becomes:

**Dysfunctional** since they would be tempted to pursue sectional interests at the expense of long-term social development and stability. Modern democratic societies, therefore, develop:

**Checks and balances** on the ability of groups to exercise power. These include things like democratic elections (where powerful groups can be voted out of office), a 'free press' that is able and willing to draw public attention to abuses of power, and so forth.

## Digging deeper: The functions of the state

To understand the general role of the state we need to understand that society, according to **Parsons** (1951), is a:

**Normative system**; that is, a *social system* founded on certain types of normative understanding and, of course, *integration* (people have to be socialised into the general norms of their society). The system, if it is to function, has *needs* which can be expressed in terms of:

**Imperatives** (or commands). For example, there is a *need* for people to be socialised into both the general normative structure of society (human development) and the specific normative needs of different institutions (think about how you are expected to behave within the education system and the consequences of deviance).

As societies become more complex (*functionally differentiated*), the state also develops more complex forms. Think, for example, about the different forms of political democracy – local and general elections, universal suffrage (everyone has the right to vote), and so forth – that exist in our society now, compared with 500 years ago. This relationship between society and the state is significant because it suggests that the state plays a functional role in the:

**Coordination of system resources**. In other words, the complex machinery of the state develops as a direct reflection of general social development, in terms of:

- **Political development**: The state plays a range of roles in terms of political organisation (such as elections), legal organisation (the development and application of laws), relations with other countries and the like.
- **Economic development**: Part of this role involves enforcing various legal relationships (such as laws governing economic contracts, who you may marry, and so forth), the punishment of criminality and the like, but the state also coordinates the relationship between different economic organisations (such as employers and trade unions).

- **Cultural development**: In the UK, the state regulates the education system and from time to time attempts to regulate family relationships (by encouraging or discouraging different types of relationship, such as the introduction of civil partnerships (2004) that give, according to the government's **Women and Equality Unit** (2005), 'same-sex couples . . . parity of treatment in a wide range of legal matters with those opposite-sex couples who enter into a civil marriage').

## The potting shed

**Identify and briefly explain two ways the state currently regulates family behaviour.**

The state, in other words, handles the mechanics of social (normative) organisation – it represents the means by which the *social system* is kept in broad equilibrium. In this respect, an important role for the state is that of an *integrating mechanism* for the system as a whole. It is the means through which system adjustments are carried out, a classic example being the development of state education in England at the end of the nineteenth century. Tensions within the social system – between the needs of industrial employers (workers with basic literacy and numeracy) and the inability of the family group to perform this literacy and numeracy function – were resolved by the development of state-funded schools.

## New right

A contemporary variation on the general functionalist approach is that of the:

**New Right**, whose general position can be summarised in terms of the:

**Minimalist state**. The argument here is that economic prosperity and social cohesion are best served by the operation of 'free economic markets' – in other words, as **Hildyard** (1998) notes, for the New Right the *marketplace* is the arena in which a society's wealth is created, mainly because it encourages:

- **Entrepreneurial activity**: People strive to develop new and better ways to make money, which leads to creativity and innovation.
- **Individual freedoms**: For markets to work efficiently (and for the greatest levels of wealth creation) people need the freedom to live and behave in ways that maximise both their individual abilities and their responsibilities towards others (in terms of, for example, providing for their dependants).
- **Efficiency**: In the economic marketplace there is no room for subsidies or restrictive practices that use social resources to protect people from either the consequences of their own behaviour (inefficient production methods, for example) or the consequences of competition.

The modern state, from the New Right position, is subject to two processes:

- **Centralisation**: Decision-making is carried out by state representatives 'divorced from the realities' of the marketplace.
- **Bureaucracy**: As the state grows larger and more complex it is slow to respond to the changing economic needs of society.

The New Right objection, therefore, is to

## Discussion point: Evaluating efficiency

**Oxfam** (2004) reports: 'The UK pays around £4 billion into the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) to subsidise British and European farming … The average payment to seven of the wealthiest landowners in England amounts to £879 a day … The annual food bill for an average family of four is £800 higher than it would be without the CAP.'

In small groups, identify and discuss arguments *for* and *against* the continued payment of subsidies to UK farmers. We have done the first one for you.

| Arguments for subsidy | Arguments against subsidy |
|---|---|
| Rural unemployment falls | Inefficient farming methods |
| **Further arguments?** | |

the state developing into an 'autonomous institution' with a logic and momentum of its own, and the solution is to cut back the state by stripping it of any function that could be 'better carried out' by private companies or individuals. As **Hildyard** puts it, for the New Right, 'the best government is the least government'.

This general position is related to functionalism in the sense that it recognises that the state has a role to play in society in terms of what **Sowell** (2002) characterises as 'ensuring observance of the "rules" essential to the continuance of free markets'. In other words, the *minimalist state* is limited to guaranteeing individuals the freedom to go about their daily lives (however this is actually achieved).

## Preparing the ground: Marxism and power

**Marxism**, in all its variations, is a form of elite theory in the sense that it advances the theory that power in society resides with a:

**Ruling class**, consisting of the owners of the means of economic production (the *bourgeoisie*). In this respect:

**Economic ownership** is the most significant source of power in society – power that creates both political influence (the institutions of government and the state reflect the interests of owners) and cultural influence (through ownership of the media, for example). The distribution of power in capitalist societies has a couple of characteristics:

- **Concentration**: Power is concentrated in the hands of a relatively small number of wealthy and influential people.
- **Interests**: Power is used to further the interests of the powerful at the expense of the powerless.

**Conflict** occurs because, at root, the rich and powerful want to consolidate and expand their wealth while the poor and powerless would like a share of this wealth, an assessment that points to a:

**Constant-sum** theory of power.

Within this general position we can note a couple of variations.

## Instrumental Marxism

From this position, power flows from the 'top' of society (a ruling class) to the bottom (the subject classes) and represents 'a tool' to control the behaviour of the powerless. In this respect, control is exercised at all levels of society:

- **Economically**: Power is most obviously exercised in the workplace (such as control over people's time, wages and working conditions). In addition, wealth is a powerful instrument through which to buy or create political influence.
- **Politically**: Those with political power favour the interests of an economic elite, not only in terms of how the state machinery can be used for the economic benefit of a ruling class (tax subsidies and the like), but also in areas such as law creation, where laws are seen to favour the interests and behaviours of the ruling class.
- **Culturally**: Ideological control (over how people think about the social world) extends through areas like the mass media and the education system.

### ✻ SYNOPTIC LINK

**Education: Bowles and Gintis (1976) argue that the education system is structured, in terms of knowledge, qualifications, rules and routines, in ways that reflect ideas favourable to a ruling class.**

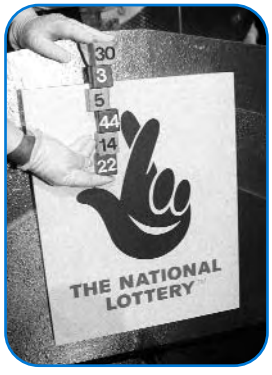
## Structural Marxists

A different approach to understanding the distribution of power in capitalist society is taken by structural Marxists. **Poulantzas** (1975), for example, argues we should see power in terms of how it pervades all aspects of a society. In other words, power is not simply a tool used by the bourgeoisie to keep the subject classes in their place; rather, it represents a way of creating a:

**World view**, a lens through which the social world is filtered. Power is used to create a 'way of life', one to which the subject classes are continually exposed through a variety of:

**Cultural institutions** (such as the media, education system and religion). This represents a *hegemonic* view of power that operates in two main ways:

- **Continuous exposure** to a familiar set of ideas reflecting capitalist views about the nature of social life. As **Bocock** (1986) argues, the effectiveness of *hegemonic power* lies in the way people from *all classes* are encouraged to 'buy into' ideas ultimately favourable to the interests of a ruling class – a simple but effective example being something like the UK National Lottery. Each week millions of people buy a lottery ticket, even though the odds of being struck by lightning (1 in 3 million) are better than their chances of winning the jackpot (1 in 10 million). The point, of course, is that people *want* to be rich (and someone, after all, *will* become rich each week).




**Strike it lucky before you're struck unluckily?**

- **Marginalisation** and **criticism** of alternative world views.

## ✻ SYNOPTIC LINK

**Stratification and differentiation:** These general ideas can be used to inform your assessment of Marxist theories of social class.

## Digging deeper: Marxism and the state

Although Marxists have put forward a range of differing interpretations about the role of the state in capitalist societies, we can note some general points of agreement within this perspective:

- **Capitalist state**: The role of the state is, ultimately, that of protecting and enhancing the economic and political interests of the ruling class.
- **Partiality**: The state, as **Eriksen** (2004) notes, is *not* a 'neutral framework for struggle and compromise'; it doesn't, in other words, reflect the interests of 'society as a whole' by balancing competing economic, political and ideological interests. It is *not* an arena where 'common social values' are created; rather, state power is directed towards promoting and maintaining values favourable to a ruling class.

The reasons for this general perception are not hard to find since, for Marxists, the state reflects the nature of class relationships and conflict in capitalist society. In a situation where the interests of one class (the *bourgeoisie*) are the opposite of those of another (the *proletariat*), it follows that the role of the state must be to promote and enhance the specific interests of the class which, almost by definition, controls it. Ultimately, the state performs this service through its 'monopoly of violence' – the power of the state, either directly (**Milliband**, 1973) or indirectly (**Poulantzas**, 1975), reflects the nature of unequal class relationships in capitalist society.

## Weeding the path

There are, as we have seen, differences of interpretation over the specific role of the state within Marxist theory.

**Instrumentalist** positions see the machinery and institutions of the capitalist state (government and the civil service, for example) as being controlled by a ruling class, and the role of the state is viewed as a channel through which ruling-class interests are articulated (spread throughout society) and promoted. There is, therefore, a relatively direct and straightforward:

**Correspondence** between ruling-class interests and the actions of the state. Economic power is reflected in political power (the control of government and the institutions of the state) through a process of what **Glasberg** (1989) calls:

**State capture** – the idea that 'capitalists control key positions within the political structure to attain their goals and further their interests'. This occurs for a couple of reasons:

- **Economic interests**: The state both reflects and acts in the interests of a ruling class because its economic ownership and control makes it the most powerful force in society.
- **Political personnel**: Politicians are either part of the ruling class (immersed in its

interests and values) or *agents* of an economic elite in the sense of identifying the interests of a ruling class with the interests of society as a whole (and acting accordingly).

## Role

Overall, from this position the role of the state is a wholly *dependent* one – the most powerful economic groups in society control how the state behaves.

**Structuralist positions** take a different approach in that they don't see the state as being somehow *separate* (or used as an *instrument* of class rule) from a ruling class. Rather, the interests of a ruling class are *automatically* reflected in the political behaviour of the state since, for someone like **Poulantzas** (1975), the idea of a capitalist state that doesn't reflect the interests of a dominant economic class is 'untenable' – there is simply no reason why a dominant economic class would not also be the dominant political class.

As **Carson** (2004) notes: 'Political leadership does not have to be subject, in any crude way, to corporate [business] control. Instead, the very structure of the corporate economy and the situations it creates compel the leadership to promote corporate interests . . . policies that stabilize the corporate economy and guarantee steady . . . profits are the only imaginable alternatives'. Having said this, the:

**Correspondence** between economic power and political power is neither direct nor straightforward in capitalist democracies. **Apple** (2000), for example, suggests *hegemonic control* is a:

**Reflexive process** – one subject to constant re-evaluation in the light of challenges to bourgeois ideas. Ruling-class power, in other words, has to be sufficiently *flexible* and *adaptable* to incorporate new ideas and explanations without ever losing sight of the fundamental values of capitalist economics.

## Problems

In addition, we can note two further complicating ideas:

- **Class fractions**: A ruling class is not necessarily free of conflicts and contradictions. The particular economic interests of *manufacturers*, for example, are not necessarily the same as those of *financial* capitalists (such as banks). Although both have a *broad interest* in 'maintaining capitalism', this doesn't mean their relationship is necessarily *consensual* (banks, for example, make money through interest they charge and manufacturing capitalists are subject to these costs).
- **Class domination**: Differences within a ruling class make it difficult to see how their broad common interests can be translated into specific (*instrumental*) state actions. Rather, the state from this position acts as a necessary balancing mechanism *between* the different class fractions that make up the ruling class, such that internal conflicts do not endanger overall ruling-class cohesion and domination. In this respect, the state has a:
- **Relative autonomy** from the ruling class. It may, for example, make decisions that go against the particular, *short-term* interests of a ruling class (or some part of that class), but in the *long term* these decisions are designed to ensure the survival of the capitalist system (and if

this involves making concessions to the working class – a minimum wage here, legal trade unions there – then such concessions have to be made to safeguard the stability of capitalist society).

For political domination, therefore, a ruling class needs an institution (the state) that broadly reflects its interests, while *appearing* to be neutral in its composition and decision-making – something that reflects the importance of the state's:

**Ideological role. Poulantzas** argues that since ideological domination is best served when the powerless do not appreciate or realise they are being exploited, it is unnecessary for an economically powerful class to rule 'in person' (although, of course, its representatives must rule in the general interests of the bourgeoisie) – the greater the *appearance* of a *separation* between economic and political power, the better. In this respect, the state has the *appearance* of autonomy from the ruling class (it is not directly controlled) while, in reality, being dominated by people thoroughly socialised into the ideology of capitalism.

**Offe** (1974) suggests the precise way the state operates is in terms of:

**Selective mechanisms** that **Chorev** (2004) characterises as an 'institutionalized sorting process that ensures the state will only select and consider policies corresponding to the interests . . . of capital'. These operate in three main ways:

- **Negative selection** mechanisms exclude anticapitalist ideas and proposals. In the UK, for example, excluded from the political agenda are ideas such as 'employee control of industry'.
- **Positive selection**, whereby the state acts on ideas that serve the interests of a ruling class 'as a whole'. The objective is

## Growing it yourself: The element of disguise

**The Minister for Educational Security wants to introduce CCTV into every educational establishment in the UK. The plan is for cameras to be placed in every room (including lavatories). Two groups have been set up to handle this idea:**

- **Group 1 should identify possible objections to this scheme.**
- **Group 2 should identify ways to positively present this scheme to the public.**

**Once each group has finished its deliberations, the class as a whole should discuss the best way to present this idea so that it has the best possible chance of being accepted.**

**You might want to consider:**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Cost<br>Privacy issues | Possible benefits<br>Possible drawbacks | Data use, security and access |

**Note: The minister was formerly a paid consultant to the company that will supply and monitor the cameras.**

for the state to act in ways that best serve the general interests of 'capitalism' rather than the particular interests of class fractions.

- **Disguising selection**: To maintain the illusion of neutrality, the state disguises its *partiality* by claiming to act in an objective, even-handed way. For example, policies that limit the power of trade unions to take strike action are presented in terms of 'preventing public disorder' (since no reasonable person could be 'pro public disorder', by conflating the two ideas it is possible to limit the effectiveness of industrial action).

Finally, a slightly different way of seeing the role of the state in capitalist society is to adopt a:

**Dialectical approach** that suggests the state has a level of *actual autonomy* that allows it to act in ways that don't directly benefit the bourgeoisie – through welfare policies targeted at the poor and the unemployed, for example. While it's always possible to argue such policies *indirectly* benefit the ruling class (by preventing social unrest, for example), this type of 'left functionalist' explanation – where everything that happens can be made to fit the idea that a ruling class always benefits in some way – is not a particularly helpful type of explanation (since, of course, it can never be disproven).

The idea that the state is not simply a product of class relationships in society, but can, in some ways, act autonomously for the benefit of different social groups, leads us to consider an alternative conflict approach to power and the role of the state.

## ✻ SYNOPTIC LINK

**Crime and deviance:** The idea of 'left functionalism' has been used by New Left Realists (such as Young) to criticise radical criminology.

## Preparing the ground: Weberian concepts of power

In general, **Weberian** theories use a:

**Zero(constant)-sum** notion of power that can, at different times, result in both:

- **Extreme imbalances**, such as in a *monarchical system* where the ruler has absolute power (at least in theory; in practice power is usually devolved to other, trusted individuals and groups) and their subjects have little or no power – they may, for example, be slaves or bonded subjects (serfs) whose lives are directly controlled by the powerful.
- **Relative balance**, as in modern democratic societies, where political elites can be voted out of office or the relatively powerless can have some form of political representation.

In general, Weberian analysis focuses on the development of two types of group:

- **Status groups,** such as genders and ethnicities, and
- **Interest groups** – any group organised around a set of common goals.

These groups are engaged in constant power struggles, both *internally* (in terms of status differences, for example) and *externally* (between different groups), and the source of power is:

**Social resources**. Unlike *functionalists*, who view resources as long-term social goals and system requirements, *Weberian* notions of power are rooted in social relationships at the individual level – how people struggle to acquire resources to improve their personal social situations.

Although, like *Marxists*, economic power is significant, it is not always the most important social resource. *Social characteristics*, such as being male in a *patriarchal* society or white in a *racist* society, and *commodities*, such as skills and knowledge, are also important resources. In this respect:

**Sources** of power can be *economic*, *political/communal* or *cultural* (or a mix of all three). This fragmented view of power makes Weberian analysis a little more flexible than other *conflict perspectives* (such as Marxism or feminism) because it allows us to see how categories like class or gender – while clearly significant – are not necessarily always the most significant factor in any explanation of power and its distribution. In contemporary societies, for example, some women may be more powerful than some men, just as some sections of the *working class* may accumulate more (economic) power than some sections of the *middle class*. In addition, in a society where both ethnicity and wealth are valued, wealthy members of a subordinate ethnic group may not have the same overall levels of power and status as wealthy members of a majority ethnic group.

## ✻ SYNOPTIC LINK

**Social differentiation:** Weberian perspectives give us an alternative way of looking at social class and can be applied to assessments of Marxist, Functionalist and Feminist positions on social inequality.

## Digging deeper: The role of the state

If we combine **Weber's** idea of power being distributed across different social groups with his definition of the state as a 'compulsory association claiming control over territories' (and the people within them), the state is characterised by two things:

- **Autonomy** (or at least the *possibility* of autonomy) from the behaviour of competing social groups. This follows, as **Held** (1989) argues, because **Weber** considered the development of the modern state to *pre-date* capitalism. Whereas, for Marxists, the capitalist state develops out of class domination, for Weberians such as **Block** (1987) the reverse is true: capitalist forms of economic behaviour are encouraged and developed by the state. This doesn't mean the state is always or necessarily autonomous from class, gender or ethnic group control; rather, there is no necessary and inevitable relationship between, for example, ownership of the means of production and 'ownership' of the state. One reason for this is the second characteristic of modern states.
- **Bureaucracy**: The argument here is that the development of regulations and procedures within the state means it develops to reflect the concerns and preoccupations of a *bureaucratic elite* – one that exists to both administer state machinery and preserve its own power base within the state. These ideas follow from **Weber's** claim that modern states are:
- **Rational/legal organisations**, staffed and led by policy specialists and professionals

with the ability and capacity to promote or hinder political decision-making. This relates to **Weber's** ideas about power, in that knowledge (in this instance, *procedural knowledge* – how the state and its various departments operate) represents a significant source of (bureaucratic) power. In other words, without the active cooperation of bureaucratic leaders, political policies cannot be successfully enacted. **Block**, for example, uses the concept of:

- **State managers** to reflect the idea that bureaucrats are 'independent' of class control, in the sense that they do not necessarily and automatically carry out the wishes of a ruling class.

**Skocpol** (1979) also argues that we should consider the state as 'an organization for itself' – a subtle reference to Marxist ideas about class consciousness – with its role being related to:

**In the BBC TV programme *Yes Minister* (1980–84) Nigel Hawthorne (left) played a classic civil service bureaucrat (Sir Humphrey Appleby) whose main role in life was to prevent his political masters (such as Jim Hacker, centre, played by Paul Eddington) making decisions with which he did not agree (all of them, as it happens)**

**Managing change** and promoting social stability. This idea is often expressed as an:

**Interventionist role**. Because the state can act *autonomously* from *status* and *interest* groups (based on class, gender and ethnic interests, for example) it can promote a variety of political agendas, such as:

- **employment** – **Glyn** (2003) argues that all recent increases in private-sector employment have resulted from increased public (state) spending
- **gender equality** (the Sex Discrimination Act, 1975, for example)
- **globalisation** and its economic and political effects (reducing Third World debt, for instance).

**Instigating change**: **Skocpol** (1985) suggests the state can ' . . . formulate and pursue goals that are not simply reflective of the . . . interest of social groups, classes or societies'.

## Preparing the ground: Feminism and power

**Feminism** comes in a number of forms (**Livesey** and **Lawson**, 2005), but each, in its different way, focuses on the idea that women are subject to various forms and expressions of *male power*. For the sake of convenience we can outline two basic positions:

**Second-wave feminism** focuses on concepts of:

- **Patriarchy** and the ways male power is expressed in both:
  - **Cultural terms** – how male-dominated societies are structured to oppress and exploit women (the power source here

is male domination of the highest levels of economic, political and cultural institutions) – and

- **Interpersonal terms** – the specific ways male power is exercised over women, through physical violence, for example, or exploitation within the family group.

- **Sex class** expresses a *conflict approach* to understanding gender relationships in the sense that gender represents a major **horizontal cleavage** in society – men and women as distinct social classifications with their own (gender) class interests.

## Power

As with Marxist concepts of economic class, men and women have fundamentally *opposed* lives and interests. **MacKinnon** (1987), for example, argues that 'men have power over everything of value in society – even the power to decide what has value and what does not'. Male power, therefore, is expressed in two main ways:

- **Hegemony**, involving the power to define both concepts of masculinity and femininity and, in effect, what it *means* to be male and female. A concrete example here might be the concept of a:
  - **Glass ceiling** in the workplace. Women are allowed to achieve only so much and no more compared with their male counterparts. **Stephenson** (1998) suggests a more valid representation of current hegemonic relationships is the:
  - **Glass trapdoor** – women can enter predominantly male worlds (election to Parliament, for example), but only in limited numbers. Entry also comes at a price – women have to adopt *male* characteristics, values and attitudes to survive in male-dominated institutions and spaces.

- **Coercion**: For **Mackinnon**, *personal* forms of male power (such as superior strength, the willingness to use violence and the physical subordination of women) translate into *cultural* terms in that social institutions (from government, through education and family life, to the media) are:
  - **Gendered** – they reflect a *hierarchical organisation* that values male lives and experiences and devalues those of females. Social institutions, from this position, 'have been historically constructed in male images to suit male preoccupations, needs and interests'. In this respect, **Mackinnon** characterises women as being:
  - **Unempowered** in patriarchal society. They are not only alienated in terms of their relationship to men and other women, but also from their own bodies (women as the objects of male power).

### ✻ SYNOPTIC LINK

**Mass media:** These ideas can be related to the concept of the 'male gaze'.

### Digging deeper: Feminism and the state

In the main, second-wave feminist thinking has developed around the concept of a:

**Patriarchal state** with a number of dimensions of *male domination*.

**Political offices** and **positions** are male-dominated – the composition of Parliament, the Cabinet (very few women are included and, where they are, this is normally in positions relating to 'women's issues') and the civil service, for example, show women are more likely to be employed at the lowest levels and less likely to fill the highest grades (**Civil Service Statistics**, 2004).

## The potting shed

**In the 2005 UK general election, for each of the three main parties, what percentage of their elected MPs was female? (Answer at the end of the section, page 149.)**

In addition, according to **Mulholland** (2005), female civil servants earn 25% less, on average, than their male counterparts. Women are also less likely to hold full-time posts.

**Ideologically**, the state reflects and pursues male interests, agendas and concerns (ranging from gendered achievement in school, through crime, to the workplace). Areas of traditionally female concern (such as childcare or the problems associated with part-time working/family commitments) generally have a low priority for the state. As **Jessop** (2003) notes: 'Many feminists would argue that politics is dominated by the priorities of a male-based agenda.' And in a patriarchal society the role of the state is one of both reflecting and reinforcing gender inequalities.

## Weeding the path

This *conflict view* of the state, where its composition and behaviour reflect either *class* relationships (*Marxist feminism*) or *patriarchal* relationships that pre-date the modern state (*radical feminism*), is not necessarily shared by all second-wave feminists.

**Liberal feminism**, for example, has generally adopted a more *Weberian* approach to understanding the role of the state in the sense that its potential *autonomy* from both class and patriarchal relationships means it can be used to promote policies and behaviours that both reduce gender inequalities and address feminist issues:

- **workplace equality** (equal pay, conditions and treatment)
- **sex discrimination** (making such behaviour illegal)
- **childcare provision** (for working mothers, single parents, and so forth).

In this respect, feminists such as **Brown** (1992) have argued that feminists should *engage* with the state for two main reasons: it has an important role to play (potentially) in changing women's lives and many women are *dependent* on it, either as employees or as recipients of state aid.

In the final part of this section we can examine some contemporary notions of both the distribution of power and the role of the state under the general heading of:

**Power in postmodernity**, initially in terms of *third-wave feminism* and finally in terms of late/postmodernism.

## Preparing the ground: Post-feminism and power

**Third-wave feminism** reflects a different approach to understanding the distribution of power between the sexes, one that focuses on:

**Vertical cleavages** – gender relationships complicated by class, age and ethnicity (upper-class women, in terms of experiences and interests, may have more in common with upper-class men than with lower-class women).

Analysis of the relative distribution of power focuses more on the lives of individual men and women than on the (supposed) power differences between them as 'sex classes' – ideas that reflect a broad sense of social change and a consequent change of feminist focus. If *modernist* feminism focused on how women were *disempowered* in patriarchal society, *post-feminism* shifts the focus to an understanding of:

**Gender constructions**. The social construction of gender is not, of course, a new idea, but feminists such as **Butler** (1990) take the idea of *constructionism* much further, to talk about gender as:

**Performance** in the sense that being male or female is not something you *are* but something you *do* – there is nothing intrinsic (*essential*) to the biological categories 'male' or 'female' that determines how we think, feel or behave. Observed gender differences result from the way power shapes both our perceptions and our lives.

## The potting shed

**Identify and briefly explain two ways socialisation shapes perceptions of gender and its associated identities.**

Similarly, **Kristiva** (1995) argues that categories like 'man' or 'woman' are too restrictive (and hence meaningless in terms of *lived realities* – although they are clearly not meaningless in terms of how they are generally used). If there are 'as many sexualities as there are individuals' it follows that to talk about power relationships in terms of social groups is similarly meaningless. **Haraway** (1991) blurs the 'gender divide' further with the idea of:

**The cyborg**: She uses this concept to explore two ideas:

- **Space**: Where people increasingly interact in *cyberspace*, through computer networks, traditional notions of gender and biology become redundant since interaction is not face to face.

**The cyborg: Part-human, part-machine**

- **Networks**: How people (of whatever sex) are connected (networked) in cyberspace is more significant than how they are connected (or not) in 'the real world'.

In other words, interaction across computer networks can be:

- **Agendered**: First, you don't necessarily know whether the people you interact with are male or female, and second, they – or you – may disguise their gender (a female claiming to be male, for example). The distribution of power across *space* and *networks*, therefore, becomes less a matter of 'gender relationships' as they're traditionally conceived, and more one of exploring how *individuals* accumulate, use and distribute power.
- **Girl power**: A further dimension to post-feminist thinking about power is a version of femininity focused on female bodies, sexuality and experiences. Here, the concept of *girl power* is both *ironic* ('girl' is traditionally used to suggest a relatively powerless woman) and *empowering* (a reassertion of female identity). The 'in-your-face' aggressiveness of girl power (the *ladette*, for example) both co-opts and confronts traditional forms of male behaviour.

## Digging deeper: Post-feminism and the state

**Third-wave feminism** has generally adopted an:

**Intersectional approach** to understanding male and female lives. In other words, it's not just a case of variables such as class, age and ethnicity being significant factors in gender development; it's also a fact that there are significant differences within artificial gender categories, identities and sexualities.

These *gender contradictions* don't just occur in society – they are also reflected in the role of the state, as **Jessop** (2003) notes when he talks about the way 'state structures and policy areas' are changing in the light of changes to the way we think about gender. On the one hand, the modernist state with its centralised bureaucracy and procedures plays an important role in:

**Defining gender categories**, in terms of what someone is or is not *legally* allowed to be (such as male *or* female). On the other hand, the state has responded to changing attitudes and behaviours by conferring legitimacy on a wider range of gendered behaviours (especially in relation to sexual identities – *civil partnerships*, for example, take a further step towards official recognition of same-sex relationships).

Unlike their predecessors who saw *patriarchy* as being 'embedded in state structures and practices', post-feminism argues that there is no logical necessity for this to be the case. On the contrary, post-feminists point to a couple of significant ideas when theorising the role of the modern state in relation to gender:

**Heterogeneity**: **Mottier** (2004) notes that post-feminists do not see 'the state as a homogeneous, unitary entity which pursues specific interests'. Rather, it represents a 'plurality of arenas of struggle, rather than a unified actor', in two basic ways:

- **Externally**, in the sense of differences in the way different nation states (even those of a broadly similar democratic nature) enact gender-based policies.
- **Internally**: The state is not simply a 'homogeneous, undifferentiated, mass';

rather, it consists of different departments that may or may not act in concerted ways. In other words, gendered social policies are not necessarily consistent across all parts of the state structure; the policies pursued by one department may contradict the activities of other departments. **Toynbee** (2005), for example, argues that tax credits paid by the state to low-income families 'have become a way of subsiding low-paying employers'. Part of the state encourages people (especially women) to take/keep low-paid work (thereby lowering levels of unemployment), while another part effectively encourages employers to pay low wages through the use of subsidies.

What this means, therefore, is that we should view the modern state as a:

**Fragmented** structure that is neither 'wholly patriarchal' nor 'wholly non-patriarchal' – an idea that leads post-feminism to focus on the *positive aspects* to the role of the modern state, in particular the various ways its resources have been used to both improve male and female lives and to change attitudes towards gender. As **Mottier** notes, the existence of a welfare state in the UK 'has a positive effect on gender relations in that it makes for a lessening of the financial dependency of women on men'.

## Preparing the ground: Postmodern power

As with their modernist counterparts, a range of ideas and explanations have been advanced by postmodern theorists for changing interpretations of both the nature and distribution of power.

**Foucault** (1980), for example, argues that explanations for the distribution of power in 'late modernity' require a different approach to the thinking we've previously outlined. Unlike traditional positions where, for example, power resides with dominant groups (the 'ruling class' of Marxism or the 'male power' of traditional feminism), power, as **Gauntlett** (1998) notes, isn't tied to 'specific groups or identities', mainly because such groups and identities are no longer (if indeed they ever were) rigid and unchanging. On the contrary, if social life and identities are:

**Fluid** and **amorphous** (having no fixed shape), it follows that power also has this characteristic; it flows through particular contexts and situations – at different times and in different situations people exercise varying levels of power. No one in this scenario is 'completely powerful' and, of course, no one is completely powerless.

## Powershift

In addition, when we looked earlier at the *nature of power* we noted the significance to **Foucault** of *discourse* and its related elements of *language* and *knowledge*. **Toffler** (1991) picks up this idea to suggest a change in the way we think about and understand power when he argues it has three basic sources:

- **violence** – something that can only be used *negatively* (punishment)
- **wealth** – something that can be used both *negatively* and *positively* (either preventing others from becoming wealthy or sharing wealth around)
- **knowledge** – something that can be *transformative* (or *shared* without necessarily diluting or diminishing the source itself – shared knowledge, for

example, can be a source of increased power). In this respect, **Toffler** argues that postmodernity is characterised by a '*powershift*' in that *knowledge* is now the dominant source of power in society.

## Digging deeper: The postmodern state

Postmodern explanations for the role of the state turn on the concept of:

**Globalisation**, in terms of how it impacts on the political, economic and cultural structures of modern societies. We can understand this idea in a variety of ways.

**Essentialism**: The types of (modernist) explanation we've outlined all (with the possible exception of **Mann's** (1986) concept of *overlapping networks*) claim the state has *essential* features that can be empirically described (such as administrative capabilities, departmental and legal structures, and so forth). Postmodernists, however, advocate an:

**Anti-essentialist position**. The 'state' is a *label* we give to a number of *processes*. As **Allen** (1990) notes in the context of (post-) feminism, analysis should focus on a range of *areas* (policing, law and medical culture, for example) and *issues* (such as sexuality, the body and bureaucratic culture). Although, in modernist terms, we're encouraged to see the state as a:

**Centre** (something that has both substance and power and functions as a stabilising force in society), **Lyotard** (1979) argues that there are 'many centres' in postmodern society (none of which is able to stabilise or 'hold society together'). Rather than see the state as a *centralised* power base, charged with giving substance to the various (conflicting or consensual) factions within society and government, we should view 'the state' as, in **Foucault's** terms, 'a diffuse and dispersed' range of institutions and processes, many of which have little or nothing to do with conventional questions of 'government', which leads us to the question of the 'power of the state' to control and direct people.

## Weeding the path

At the heart of postmodern analyses of the role of the state is a central *contradiction*: the external (international) processes of *globalisation* weaken the ability of the state to control:

- **economic events** – the price of oil, the investment in and physical location of jobs, corporate taxation and the like
- **political events** – where the UK, for example, is subject to European Union laws, human rights agreements, and so forth
- **cultural events** – think, for example, about how the flow of information across the internet makes it difficult for politicians and the state to 'manage news'.

However, one form of state response to this 'loss of external control' is a consequent tightening of *internal* control and surveillance. Issues of identity cards, for example, or the use of CCTV surveillance, demonstrate the attempt to control *physical space*, while laws relating to 'terror' or 'harassment' may represent similar attempts to control *psychological space*. **Giddens** (1985) suggests *surveillance* (along with industrialism, capitalism and militarism) represents one of the key:

## Discussion point: Responding to terrorism

Walter Wolfgang, an 82-year-old delegate, was ejected from the 2005 Labour Party conference for shouting, 'That's a lie and you know it', during a speech by the Foreign Secretary. He was prevented from re-entering the conference by the subsequent police use of the Terrorism Act (2000), an Act described by the **Home Office** (2001) as 'legislation containing the most vital counter-terrorism measures'.

How do you think the state should respond to the 'threat of terrorism'?

**Clusterings** in late modern society that come together in the form of 'the state'. He argues that the extension of both *covert* and *overt* surveillance is an important development for the state's role because it represents a fundamental change in the way people are controlled through modern state agencies.

### Moving on

In this section we've examined definitions and explanations of power and how they relate to the role of the state. In the next section we can develop and apply these general ideas to an understanding of different types of political party and ideology.

(Answer to 'Digging deeper': 2005 general election: Female MPs: Labour (28%); Conservative (9%); Liberal Democrat (16%).)

## 3. Different political ideologies and their relationship to different political parties

In previous sections we looked at the political process in terms of different types of social group (such as parties and movements) and related their organisation and purpose to the pursuit of political power. This section narrows the focus to look specifically at political parties and the beliefs that underpin their existence.

### Preparing the ground: Ideology and party

An *ideology* involves a number of general ideas relating to the way we think about (and behave in) the social world, and while the concept may, as **Bjørnskov** (2004) notes, be 'hotly disputed . . . difficult to define and consequently difficult to measure', for our initial purpose we can think of ideologies as involving such things as norms, values and beliefs that are, in some way, connected and interrelated. In this respect ideological beliefs may be demonstrably true or demonstrably false, but the important thing, as far as *political ideologies* are concerned, is that they are:

**Collective beliefs** – ideas, in other words, shared with and supported by others in a culture, community or society. For **Jones** (2004), *political* ideologies have the same basic features as other forms of ideology, in that they involve:

- **beliefs** about the nature of the world
- **justifications** for those beliefs (and, implicitly or explicitly, beliefs about the superiority of such beliefs when compared with other ideological forms)
- **political objectives** – whatever these beliefs are designed to achieve
- **instructions** about how these objectives can be realised.

In this respect, political ideologies need to be considered in terms of both their:

**Content** (the particular beliefs they represent) and the various ways beliefs are put into:

**Practice** – *operationalised* through some form of political process.

**Mullins** (1972), for example, links these ideas when he argues that political ideologies involve 'a program of collective action for the maintenance, alteration or transformation of society', while **Gerring** (1997) suggests that 'ideologies' (a set of related beliefs and values) become *political* ideologies when they 'specify a concrete programme of action' (such as that found in a party manifesto).

## WARM-UP: THE STATE OF THE PARTIES

To make informed choices about a political party to support, you, as either eligible or potential voters, should know what each party stands for in terms of their general policies.

In small groups, use the preceding table as

| Policy area | Labour | Conservative | Liberal |
|---|---|---|---|
| Education | | | |
| Crime | | | |
| Immigration | | | |
| The economy | | | |
| Europe | | | |
| Equal rights | | | |
| The environment | | | |

the basis for identifying your beliefs about the broad political policies put forward by each of the three main parties at the 2005 general election.

Compare your answers with the chart at www.sociology.org.uk/a24aqa.htm

What does this comparison tell us about the relationship between voters and parties?

Considering these ideas, therefore, we can initially distinguish between two basic forms of political ideology: *systemic* and *party*.

## Systemic

**Systemic forms** relate to broad (and fundamental) beliefs about the basis and general organisation of political behaviour within a society. They refer, in other words, to the idea of political *systems* which, for the sake of example, we can characterise in two broad ways (*totalitarian* and *democratic*):

## Totalitarian

**Totalitarian** political systems are characterised by a:

- **Totalist ideology**: This represents a set of fundamental ideas and practices (an 'official ideology') that is not merely the *dominant* political form in a society, but the *only* permissible form. According to **Grobman** (1990), totalist ideologies seek to establish 'complete political, social, and cultural control over their subjects'; classic twentieth-century examples here might be the Soviet Union under the control of Stalin (*communism*) or Nazi Germany under the control of Hitler (*fascism*).
- **Single-party state**: Unlike democracies, where different parties and ideologies may be in competition (the *pluralist doctrine* we outlined in the previous section), totalitarian societies are organised around a single party. In this respect, such societies represent a form of:
- **Dictatorship**, whether this involves a single powerful figure (a *leader*) or a powerful group of people (an *oligarchy*). Whatever the precise form, party organisation is, according to **Friedrick** and **Brzezinski** (1965), strongly *hierarchical* with a high degree of centralised control and decision-making. Power, in this respect, is exercised 'from the centre, outwards' – in other words, political decisions are made by a relatively small political group at the top of the party hierarchy and are then disseminated to the mass of the party/population.
- **Social control**: This system extends control *downwards* into every area of social life (family, education, work, and so forth) and the legal system is usually under the control or influence of the party hierarchy. A common feature is the existence of a 'secret police force' whose main role is:
- **Ideological policing** – an activity designed to uphold, maintain and extend the existing political order. Such policing may involve imprisonment without trial, torture or even death.

In general terms, therefore, totalitarian societies develop a system of:

**Monopoly control** that extends across all areas of society – economic, political and ideological. This may involve, for example, the development of the type of *corporate state* structure we outlined in a previous section on the elite state, as well as party

## China steps up Web controls but investors untroubled

Lindsay Beck, www.reuters.com 23/09/05

'China's cyber police have intensified controls over the country's 100 million Internet users in the past few months but that hasn't stopped Western Web firms from pushing ever farther into the booming market.

Rather than using their clout to help push the boundaries of free speech and information in the one-party state, critics say companies like Google, Yahoo and Microsoft are at best turning a blind eye to the machinations of the cyber police. "It's too early to say that just by doing business in China and developing the Internet in China they will foster democracy and human rights," said Julien Pain, of media watchdog Reporters Without Borders. "It doesn't work that way."

## China 'blocks Google news site'

(www.bbc.co.uk: 30/11/04)

China has been accused of blocking access to Google News by the media watchdog, Reporters Without Borders. The … English-language news site had been unavailable for the past 10 days. It said the aim was to force people to use a Chinese edition of the site which, according to the watchdog, does not include critical reports.'

control of all means of communication – press, radio and television, film and the like. In some modern societies, control extends to the internet by the blocking of websites critical of the state.

## Democratic

**Democratic political systems** have a number of different characteristics:

- **Pluralist ideology**: Democratic ideologies stress that, ultimately, political authority resides with 'the people'; in other words, there exists a form of *social contract* between those who govern and those who are governed, based around a number of basic ideas:
- **Free elections** based, in contemporary democracies, on the principle of every citizen having the right to periodically vote for the party – or individual – of their choice. In the UK, for example, a number of competing political parties exists, with the governing party (Labour, as of 2005) serving for a *maximum* of five years (although the prime minister may call an election before this).

  A basic principle underpinning the idea of free elections is:
- **Government accountability**. The electorate can reasonably expect, within the dictates of changing national and global circumstances, a government to carry out the policies it presented in its manifesto. Democratic accountability also involves *interest groups* (such as the media) being free to examine and criticise government ideas, policies and behaviours. Ultimately, the ruling political party *must* submit to periodic election and, if defeated, engage in an orderly and peaceful handover of power.
- **Democratic debate**: The law-making process is the result of democratic discussion and voting from within the supreme constitutional body in a democratic society, although different

democracies structure their parliamentary systems differently. In the UK there is an *elected* 'Lower House' (the House of Commons) charged with originating political legislation, and an *unelected* 'Upper Chamber' (the House of Lords) whose main task is to review this legislation. In the USA, Congress (Lower) and the Senate (Upper) perform similar functions, although here both are democratically elected.

## The potting shed

**Identify and briefly explain one argument in favour of the UK system of an unelected Upper Chamber and one argument against.**

- **Civil** and **political rights** involving ideas related to freedom of:
  - **association** – to form and join groups which may be fundamentally opposed to government policies and practices, for example
  - **speech** – to express and debate ideas that may be contrary to government policy
  - **action** – to peacefully demonstrate and protest, for example.

  Fundamental to these ideas are further ideas such as *legal equality* – the right to a fair trial, regardless of class or ethnicity, for example – and the freedom of the media to disseminate information in ways that are not subject to party political control, influence or censorship.

Finally, we can note that there are two main forms of democratic ideology:

- **Participatory (direct) democracy**, where everyone has a direct say in the decision-making process. Modern societies tend to be too large and complex for this type, but elements of direct democracy do appear in modern societies from time to time in the shape of:
  - **National referenda** in various European countries, including Britain (the last was over the decision about whether to join the European Community in 1973). More recently (1997), referenda were held Scotland and Wales over questions of *political devolution*.
  - **State referenda** in the United States or Switzerland where, in addition to voting for political representatives, people may vote on a range of propositions (concerning local taxation, criminal law, and so forth) that, if passed, become legally binding.
- **Representative democracy** (characteristic of the UK) where government decisions are taken by the *elected representatives* of the population – once elected, politicians are assumed to have a *mandate* from the electorate to take decisions on their behalf, without the need for further consultation. A *delegatory version* of this sometimes exists, whereby elected representatives are mandated to vote in ways decided by the electorate.

**Party forms**, on the other hand, relate to the particular ways *systemic beliefs* are operationalised within a society. In the UK, for example, although each party represented in Parliament has its own unique set of policies, principles and practices, all generally subscribe to the

notion of democratic political ideology we've just outlined.

| UK Parliament: May 2005 | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Party** | **Seats** | **% of vote** |
| Labour | 356 | 35.3% |
| Conservative | 198 | 32.4% |
| Lib Dem | 62 | 22.0% |
| Others (nationalists and independents) | 30 | 10.3% |

In other words, when we examine specific forms of political ideology we need to do so in the light of these *systemic* beliefs – something we can do by noting the general ways political ideologies can be classified in democratic societies.

The conventional way to classify political ideologies is to view them as a continuous line (the *continuum*), at one end of which are left-wing parties (communist and socialist) and at the other are right-wing parties (conservative and fascist) – see below.

## Weeding the path

Although this type of classification has some basic use in classifying political ideologies and their relationship to political parties, it is a crude typology with some serious drawbacks.

- **Complexity**: Political ideologies and parties are complex entities and this type of continuum fails to reflect this. The Labour Party, for example, is a broad organisation and some members could be classified as communist while others are much closer to New Right beliefs.
- **Fragmentation**: Ideological positions (and the parties that hold them) tend to be more fragmented in contemporary societies – Labour policies, for example, have embraced both ideas and issues (social inclusion, welfare, child poverty and the like) conventionally associated with socialism, and ideas and issues (such as increased prison funding) conventionally associated with the New Right.
- **Meaning**: It's not clear whether this type of classification has any real meaning in contemporary societies, especially if we think about how political parties may change and adapt to different political situations. The Labour Party, for example, has been transformed over the past 20 years, from one advocating policies such as the nationalisation of public services (gas, electricity and telecommunications, for instance) to one that now embraces policies (such as privatising some aspects

of health care and education) traditionally associated with the Conservative Party.

The above notwithstanding, we can illustrate the idea of *ideological difference* by comparing the UK Labour and Conservative parties.

## The Labour Party

Traditionally, Labour has been viewed as what **Nilsson** (2000) terms a 'reformist socialist party'. Similarly, **Dearlove** and **Saunders** (2001) argue Labour has 'always been a reformist party dedicated to running Capitalism, as against a socialist party dedicated to the overthrow of Capitalism'. Its origins as the political wing of the trade union movement in the early twentieth

## Growing it yourself: Labour's changing ideological principles

**We can demonstrate this general ideological change by comparing some current examples of Labour thinking (as presented during the successful 2005 election campaign) with that put forward during the unsuccessful 1982 election campaign (in a document memorably described by the then Shadow Environment Secretary and current Labour MP Gerald Kaufman as 'the longest suicide note in history').**

**Summarise the continuities and changes in Labour Party ideology between 1982 and 2005.**

| 1982 | 2005 |
|---|---|
| Increase public spending and investment. | Increase choice over hospital and school places. |
| Renationalise privatised 'public industries'. | Increase numbers of police, community support officers and prison places; new Supreme Court. |
| Promote women's rights by strengthening the Equal Pay and Sex Discrimination Acts. | New equality commission; ban incitement to religious hatred. House of Lords = appointed chamber; more elected mayors. |
| Introduce citizenship and immigration laws which do not discriminate against women, black and Asian Britons. | Reduce asylum numbers by tougher rules on settlement and more deportations. |
| Stop further development of nuclear power, cancel the Trident nuclear missile programme and remove (American) nuclear bases from Britain. | Stand by Iraq war. New powers for government to detain terror suspects; increase defence spending. |
| Withdraw from the European Community. | Target of 60% for cutting $CO_2$ emissions by 2050. |
| | Back new EU constitution. |

century gave it a close association with the interests of the working class and, although it still retains this association, in recent times it has reinvented itself (as New Labour) in a successful attempt to both gain and hold political power. In this respect we can characterise Labour as a:

**Social democratic party**, one that no longer advocates 'worker control' of the economy, state ownership of public services and the like. In some respects, therefore, it represents a party of the 'centre ground' – one that appeals to both business and labour interests.

## Growing it yourself: Conservatism's changing ideological principles

**Like its Labour counterpart, the Conservative Party has changed ideologically over the past 20 years, something we can demonstrate by comparing examples of Conservative thinking presented during the unsuccessful 2005 election campaign with examples put forward during the successful 1982 election campaign.**

**Summarise the continuities and changes in Conservative Party ideology between 1982 and 2005.**

| 1982 | 2005 |
|---|---|
| Trade union reforms (secret ballots and restrictions over ability to strike). | Increase choice over hospital and school places; increase involvement of private sector. |
| Reform of employment law to reduce barriers to employment. | Increase police numbers and prison places. |
| Development of youth training schemes and reform of school curriculum. | Improve quality of motorways and major roads. |
| Privatisation of 'publicly owned' industries. | Encourage renewable sources of energy. Expand roads/speed up repairs. |
| Continue sale of council housing. | House of Lords = mostly elected chamber; repeal Human Rights Act. |
| Lower and simplified taxation. | Cut personal taxation. |
| Oppose racial discrimination. | Oppose banning incitement to religious hatred. |
| No withdrawal from European Community. | Annual refugee and immigrant quotas. |
| Continue development of 'safe nuclear power'. Maintain 'independent nuclear deterrent'. | Oppose EU constitution and adoption of euro. |
| | Back Iraq war but with reservations; oppose some new antiterror laws (e.g. ID cards). |
| | Increase defence spending. |

## The Conservative Party

Historically, the Conservative (or Tory) Party has had close ideological links with financial, industrial and agricultural interests. It can in this respect be characterised as the 'party of business'. In the twentieth century the party promoted a generally:

**Paternalist** ideological outlook, best characterised by the label 'One Nation Conservatism' – ideologically the party, while still favouring business interests, embraced a range of ideas and policies (the National Health Service, free state education and the like) that had previously been the preserve of the Labour Party.

In the 1980s, under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher, Conservative ideology took a distinctive turn with the adoption of a *New Right* economic agenda. See 'Conservatism's changing ideological principles' on the opposite edge.

The December 2005 election of **David Cameron** to lead the Conservative Party may signal a further ideological change given his pronouncement of the need for '. . . a more compassionate Conservatism' that included undoing the 'scandalous under-representation of women in the party'. He also 'promised to . . . support Tony Blair's government when the Tories agreed with it'. Liberal Democrat MP Simon **Hughes** argued meanwhile (2005): 'Mr Cameron . . . wrote the Conservative manifesto for the 2005 general election . . . he is a convinced anti-European, a keen supporter of tuition fees and is likely to back the government on nuclear power. If that is the definition of modern Conservatism, they will continue to struggle to emerge from the political wilderness.'

## Digging deeper: Ideology and party

We can dig a little deeper into the ideas and issues we've just raised in the following way.

**Systemic forms**: **Wintrobe** (2002) identifies a problem with the concept of 'totalitarian ideologies' when he notes that much of the literature, especially that produced just after the Second World War, overemphasises the idea of such societies being dominated by 'dictators wielding absolute power' and 'ruling on the basis of terror and propaganda'. He argues this 'top-down' approach to understanding dictatorships (whereby a ruler or dominant group simply imposes their will on the masses) doesn't necessarily accord with the reality of life in such societies – the fact, for example, that a substantial proportion of the population may be broadly *supportive* of the actions and behaviours of elite groups.

As he argues: 'The general population may be repressed . . . but other aspects of the regime may *compensate* for this as far as they are concerned . . . The use of repression doesn't mean dictators aren't popular. Indeed, it sometimes appears from the historical record that the more repressive they were, the more popular they became!' He suggests, therefore, classifying dictatorships in terms of *four basic types* related to concepts of *regime repression* and *population loyalty*.

This type of fine-tuning is significant for a couple of reasons. First, it suggests that not all totalitarian ideological forms are the same, and second, that some forms of totalitarianism exist 'in the margins' of what we think of as democratic ideological forms. Some forms of *one-party state* (such as China) operate a *quasi-democratic system* of

| Types of dictatorship: Wintrobe (2002) | | |
|---|---|---|
| | **Repression** | **Loyalty** |
| Tinpot | Low | Low |
| Tyrants | High | Low |
| Totalitarian | High | High |
| Timocrats | Low | High |

government that involves, for example, elections for Communist Party officials and positions. Although this is different to pluralistic democratic systems it does, nevertheless, suggest we should avoid over-simplified distinctions between the two ideological types.

In addition, some democracies have elements of what we might term *totalising tendencies*, involving ideas like:

**Elite rule**. Different democracies exhibit this feature in different ways:

- **Family**: In India, for example, the **Nehru** family has dominated post-war politics in terms of providing political leaders and prime ministers. In the USA, different dynasties (the **Kennedy** family in the 1960s and the **Bush** family in recent times) have dominated the upper political levels.
- **Party**: This can be interpreted in a couple of ways. First, the long-term political rule of the *same party* (a characteristic of Japanese politics, for example, or, indeed, the UK, where the Conservative Party was in power for around two-thirds of the last century). Second, the long-term domination of a broadly similar set of ideological principles. **Gamble** (2005), for example, argues: 'Labour critics complain that the Blair government has at best continued Thatcherism by other means, at worst by the same means. It has accepted the neoliberal political economy . . . given priority to its alliance with the US . . . has not renationalised industries or substantially changed Conservative union laws . . . the gap between rich and poor has continued to widen . . . '

These ideas are sometimes seen in terms of:

**Self-perpetuating elites**, a process that involves elite groups holding power over time, even in democratic societies, by a process of:

**Elite self-recruitment** whereby entry into elite groups is restricted to people from the 'right' family, social and educational background. An example of this type of 'elite rule' in our society might be the judiciary. **Malleson** (2003), for example, has shown that 90% of all judges are male and 98% are white.

## ✻ SYNOPTIC LINK

**Stratification and differentiation:** These ideas link into discussions about how something like elite self-recruitment enhances or diminishes life chances and social mobility.

## The potting shed

**Identify and briefly explain one way that education and one way that families can contribute to elite self-recruitment.**

The Conservative politician **Quentin Hogg** (later Lord Hailsham) raised a further interesting idea, namely that of an:

**Elective dictatorship** – the idea that once elected and with a majority in Parliament, governments can effectively 'rule' without too much regard to opposition ideas, whether these come from other political parties or from the country at large. As **Hogg** (1976) noted: 'The powers of our own Parliament are absolute and unlimited. And in this, we are almost alone. All other free nations impose limitations on their representative assemblies. We impose none.'

Although it's important not to *understate* the fundamental differences between democratic and totalitarian forms of ideology and practice, we need to be aware that differences should not necessarily be *overstated*. While **Gamble** (2005) may characterise Labour as governing in an ' . . . authoritarian, centralist style, running the government through a small circle around the leader, sidelining cabinet, parliament and party', it nevertheless has to submit itself for periodic, democratic election.

## Mind maps

**Mapping ideologies**: If the difference between *systemic ideological forms* is not necessarily clear-cut and straightforward, the work we've previously completed on party ideologies (focused, for the sake of example, on the two main UK political parties) has also demonstrated the difficulty of disentangling and mapping different ideological beliefs at the:

**Party political level**, an idea we can explore further in terms of:

**Ideological maps**. Thus far we've classified different ideological positions (and their relationship to UK political parties) in terms of a relatively unsophisticated 'left wing–right wing' continuum.

## Weeding the path

This idea has a couple of fundamental problems.

**Clarity**: Categories like 'left wing' are vague in terms of their content; not only do they cover a range of ideological groups, they have no easily determined *boundaries* (where, for example does 'left wing' end and 'right wing' begin?). A further complication is added by something like *libertarian* philosophies that embrace elements of what are conventionally seen as both right-wing ideologies (low taxation, little or no government regulation of business and charitable, rather than state, welfare systems) and left-wing ideologies (personal tolerance, the freedom to choose lifestyles and the like).

**Complexity**: It's not clear that the complexity of ideological beliefs can be expressed on a *linear* (*one-dimensional*) continuum – one polarised at the extremes (communism to the left and fascism to the right) and converging in a centre occupied by a range of 'centre-left' and 'centre-right' parties and ideologies. This picture is further complicated by the idea that political parties may express a particular set of ideological beliefs and principles while operating, in practice, under a different set of principles.

Writers like **Dearlove** and **Saunders** (2001) argue that 'it is a mistake to try to map political positions on a simple "left–right" continuum' in the contemporary UK and, instead, suggest we think about party ideological principles in a slightly different way. They argue that our society is

characterised by three great ideological traditions:

- **socialism**, with its concerns about social and economic inequality
- **conservatism**, with its paternalistic concerns for custom, tradition and evolutionary change
- **traditional liberalism**, with 'its commitment to private property, the free market and the liberty of the individual as against the threat posed by the modern state'.

Rather than each ideological position being separate from the other, whereby different political groups adopt each position as the ideological marker for their particular brand of politics (the left–right continuum), **Dearlove** and **Saunders** suggest we should see parties as being in a continual state of:

**Flux**, constantly shifting their positions as they 'dip into and out of' each tradition. Thus, the Conservative Party led by Margaret **Thatcher** (1979–1991) mixed both conservative and traditional liberal (or New Right, if you prefer) ideas with the emphasis on the latter. Following Thatcher's political demise, the party (led initially by John **Major**) gradually re-emphasised its 'traditional conservative' roots at the expense of New Right radicalism. The current party leader, David **Cameron**, has signalled both *modernisation* (increasing the number of female MPs, for example) and *continuity* with New Right policies of the recent past (such as cuts in personal taxation).

## ✻ SYNOPTIC LINK

**Crime and deviance:** In the 1997 election campaign Tony **Blair** repeatedly used the phrase, 'Tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime'. **Williamson** (2002) notes how this was ' . . . geared to appeal both to the law-and-order lobby and to those . . . who believe that crime takes place for a variety of complex social reasons which cannot, fundamentally, be changed simply by punishing individual perpetrators'.

Similarly, the Labour Party under Tony **Blair** has mixed elements of all three ideological traditions to produce a new ideological alignment sometimes called the:

**Third Way**, a position characterised by **Giddens** (1998, 2001) as neither wholly socialist nor wholly conservative – it combines different elements of these traditions to produce a:

**Political synthesis**. Rather than seeing politics as being a *choice* between two ideological positions (state-funded or charity-funded welfare systems, for example), *Third Way* politics argues there is a 'middle road' between these positions. Many current Labour policies reflect this idea – that it's possible to combine state-funded (education, the National Health Service, and so forth) with privately funded institutions.

## ✻ SYNOPTIC LINK

**Education:** Examples of this attempt to combine public and private funding can be found in this section, the development of academy schools being one example.

These ideas are explored in more detail in the final section when we look at *political participation*, mainly because some contemporary writers (such as **Lees-Marshment**, 2001, 2004) have characterised political parties as 'acting like businesses' that design their product (policies) 'to suit whatever the voters want'. This position

suggests the conventional way of understanding ideological principles and their relationship to political parties is outdated – it is no longer a case of parties developing an ideological position that is then presented to the electorate to accept or reject; rather, parties change and adapt their ideological positions to suit whatever their research tells them are the policies that will get them elected (or re-elected).

These ideas are reflected in the concept of:

**Branding**. Rather than seeing parties in terms of 'selling products' (such as a particular set of ideological beliefs), **Lees-Marshment** argues that they now act like brands – what they sell is still 'ideas', but these are related to 'whatever the market wants' rather than to some fundamental ideology.

## Weeding the path

We can look at an alternative view to the idea that it's no longer possible to think about contemporary political parties in terms of an ideological left–right continuum through the work of the **Manifesto Research Group** (as expressed by writers such as **Budge** and **Bara**, 2001) and their attempt to develop what **McLean** (2004) calls a:

**Multidimensional approach** to mapping political ideologies. According to **McLean**, 'parties try to "own" issues' (such as immigration, law and order and the like), which, once identified, can then be mapped to a general left–right continuum. The basic idea here is that the interpretation of these issues is reasonably consistent across different left–right ideological positions. As **McLean** (2004) correctly predicted, for example, 'the UK Conservative manifesto for the 2005 General Election *will* [our emphasis] contain more sentences on asylum, and fewer sentences on the NHS, than the Labour manifesto'.

By studying a range of party manifestos, **Budge** and **Bara** were able to identify 'ideological sentences' that correlated positively with either a left-wing or a right-wing political position, as shown in the table below.

**Ideological phrases: Budge and Bara (2001)**

The **Manifesto Research Group** analysed party documents for specific phrases that could be grouped into general left–right ideological categories. As the following examples show, 'left-wing sentences' are qualitatively different to those produced by 'right-wing' political parties.

| Left-wing phrases | Right-wing phrases |
|---|---|
| Democracy | Free enterprise |
| Regulate capitalism | Economic incentives |
| Nationalisation | Law and order |
| Military: negative | Military: positive |

This type of research suggests, therefore, that it may still be possible to locate different types of political party (from extreme left wing to extreme right wing and all points in between) according to their fundamental ideological principles.

## Moving on

In this section we've looked at the relationship between political ideologies and parties, and in the final section we can apply these ideas to an understanding of political participation – how and why the electorate in contemporary British society make decisions about which political parties (if any) they support.

# 4. The nature of, and changes in, different forms of political participation, including voting behaviour

This final section looks at the concept of political participation, something we touched on previously when we examined ideas about parties, pressure groups and social movements. Although we're not going to cover the same ground again, this work does provide the basis for a more thorough and focused examination of political participation. In this respect we can look initially at participation in terms of things like membership and involvement in political groups and activities, but the main focus is on an examination of different *explanations* for a specific form of political participation – *voting behaviour*.

We can begin by noting a qualification to the general focus of this section, in the form of the idea that:

**The personal is the political**. Writers like **Hanisch** (1970) have argued *all* forms of social behaviour have a political dimension since all interaction involves power relationships and decision-making. In the classroom, for example, a variety of 'personal political relationships' bubble around just beneath the surface of everyday interaction, from questions about who has the most power in the class to decisions about the length and content of the lesson or where and with whom to sit.

## ✻ SYNOPTIC LINK

**This idea can be applied to an understanding of all areas studied during the A level course.**

This argument, however, is too broad an area to cover in this section and to make things manageable we've decided to focus on various forms of:

**Public political participation**, in the sense of people's membership of, or support for, political groups or activities, as well as what **Norris et al.** (2004) term 'informal political activity . . . protests, social movements and, increasingly, voluntary activities in pressure groups, civic associations, charities and other associations'.

## Preparing the ground: Nature and changes

Political participation, as we've suggested, comes in different forms. There are, as **Dahlgren** (1999) puts it, many ways of 'imagining – and doing – democracy' and we can start to think about the general nature of (and changes to) political participation in our society by noting some basic 'models of political participation' suggested by **Leach** and **Scoones** (2002).

**Liberal models** focus on the idea of individuals 'who act rationally to advance their own interests, while the State's role is to protect and enforce their rights'. Under this model, individual rights are:

**Universal** – everyone is entitled to rights, safeguarded by the state, such as legal equality, the right to own property, to vote, and so forth. Although these rights are *automatically* given (there may be *some* restrictions in terms of age, for example), individuals are also granted:

**Choice** over whether or not to exercise such rights or to participate in the political process – voting in the UK, for example, is not compulsory (unlike in countries such as Australia and Belgium).

## WARM-UP: PERSONAL AND PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

As a class, use the following table to identify examples of 'personal' and 'public' political participation in various areas of social life (we've provided some examples to get you started).

| Specification area | Personal | Public |
|---|---|---|
| **Family** | | |
| **Education** | | |
| **Mass media** | | Support for political party |
| **Health** | | |
| **Wealth, poverty and welfare** | Giving to charity | |
| **Work and leisure** | | Trade union membership |
| **Power and politics** | | Voting |
| **World sociology** | Caring for the environment | Government aid |
| **Religion** | | |
| **Crime and deviance** | | |
| **Social inequality** | | |

## The potting shed

**Identify and briefly explain two ways that the rights of adults are different to the rights of children in the UK.**

## Communitarian models

From the work of writers like **Etzioni** (1993) and **Putnam** (2001), this participatory model focuses on the concept of a:

**Socially embedded citizen**; in other words, the 'good of the community' has priority over the interests of the individual. This model, therefore, focuses on the ways people form and sustain local communities (such as neighbourhoods) through their general participation in the political life of that community, an idea often expressed in terms of:

**Social capital** – what **Putnam** calls 'social networks of trust and reciprocity' (people, in other words, are willing and able to help each other). **Cohen** and **Prusak** (2001) suggest social capital represents a 'social glue' that binds people in (political) networks of mutual help and cooperation.

This model of political participation is one that, after a fashion, has been adopted by Labour in the twenty-first century, with their ideas about social *inclusion* and *exclusion* reflected in attempts to create or develop local self-help communities and initiatives. On a broader scale we can note that *communitarian models* of participation are characteristic of some forms of new social movement.

## ✻ SYNOPTIC LINK

**Crime and deviance:** One example of this idea is the development of community security officers to patrol local areas and neighbourhoods.

## Civic models

These represent political participation in terms of the development of specific groups that, in turn, attempt to participate in, and influence, wider political processes. In other words, they represent the idea of:

**Sectional interests** – groups which develop around a common theme or purpose and attempt to influence the decisions made by those in power. This model can be applied to a relatively wide range of groups, from citizens banding together to oppose the development of a new road or hostel in their neighbourhood, to the general behaviour of *pressure groups*.

## Identity models

Although similar to their civic counterpart, this participation model focuses on the concept of:

**Identity politics** – the idea that certain types of *identity group* (women, ethnic groups and the like) develop *group identities* based around a common theme (such as feminist politics or religious beliefs). For this type, the distinction between personal and public political participation is generally blurred – the personal experiences and beliefs of individual members are directly transferred into public political actions. An example here might be the development, especially in US politics, of New Right ('born-again') Christian groups that attempt to impose their personal religious beliefs on the general political sphere (in terms of, for example, an anti-abortion position).

We can develop more specific ideas about the nature of (and changes to) political participation by examining ideas about membership and support relating to the categories we've used in previous sections – parties, pressure groups and social movements.

## Parties

In terms of **membership**, both the main parties in the UK have seen a decline in the post-war period:

**Party membership: 1950–2004**

| Year | Labour | Conservative |
|---|---|---|
| 1950 | 1 million **Rallings** and **Thrasher** (2000) | 3 million **Strafford** (1999) |
| 2004 | 280,000 **Mullard** and **Swaray** (2005) | 300,000 **White** (2005) |

Although the decline for both major parties has been *absolute*, it has not necessarily been steady. **Sparrow** (2004) notes how Labour Party membership *increased* (from around 210,000 to 410,000) in the early part (1998)

of Tony **Blair's** leadership. This suggests parties attract and lose members in ways that reflect their changing electoral *support*.

## Weeding the path

It also suggests, as **Granik** (2003) notes, that party membership is not necessarily stable over time. She makes the distinction between:

- **Continuous members** – those who consistently renew their membership and have a long-term commitment to their chosen party – and
- **Discontinuous members** – people whose membership may fluctuate as they join, lapse and rejoin their chosen party. We shouldn't necessarily see this type of membership pattern as evidence of party discontent; members may forget to renew their membership or move away from the area in which their membership was based.

**Estelle Morris** (2004), however, suggests the *overall decline* in party membership is related to ideas like:

- **Globalisation**: She argues power in our society is increasingly *dispersed* across a range of social institutions (both national and international) and political parties are no longer at the centre of power, an idea echoing **Lyotard's** (1984) observation that there are 'many centres [of power in postmodern society] and none of them hold'. In other words, it's no longer possible for parties to monopolise political power – they face increasingly stiff competition from pressure groups and social movements, for example.
- **Ideological fragmentation**: In postmodern societies people no longer see 'social problems' as solvable on a grand scale. Poverty, for example, has many faces and dimensions that cannot be confronted head-on – the idea that 'poverty' can be easily eradicated is not something that features in the postmodern mindset. Rather, each *dimension* of poverty has to be addressed in different ways and from different angles. There is, in short, no longer the belief in a one-size-fits-all solution. As perceptions change, people lose faith in the ability of 'mass movements' (such as political parties) to confront and solve *micromanagement* problems (like regional and neighbourhood poverty), since mass movements are, almost by definition, organisations designed for *macromanagement* – operating, in other words, at the national and international political levels.
- **Communication**: The development of 24-hour news channels, the internet, and so forth, means parties may no longer require the type of organisational structure they had in the past. Rather than communicate with voters through party structures (local political associations, for example) they can now communicate *directly* with the electorate through the media, in a variety of ways:
  - **political broadcasts** and current affairs programmes
  - **poster** and **direct-mail campaigns** (paid political advertising is not allowed on UK TV, unlike in the USA where TV advertising is a central feature of political campaigns)
  - **media 'events'** and photo opportunities (such as party conferences)


***Newsnight* (BBC TV) is one of the main political/current affairs programmes on terrestrial UK TV.**

- **email and SMS** (text) communication directly to voters and potential supporters
- **websites** – most parties have their own sites and forums through which they can communicate directly with the electorate and receive feedback. Websites have the advantage of both reaching a potentially massive audience in a relatively cheap and efficient way and giving party hierarchies a high level of control over presentation and content.

**Social change**: **Morris** (2004) argues local party structures played a more central role in individual and community life in the past. Party membership was also more likely to be seen as an important aspect of people's identity and could be used as a networking platform for social and economic contacts. In contemporary society, she argues, people have a wider range of social and political institutions from which to choose, each offering differing levels of participation and commitment.

## Growing it yourself: The state of the parties

**You can find the URLs of a range of political parties at www.sociology.org.uk/a24aqa.htm (or search for a party by name using a search engine like Google or Yahoo).**

**Divide the class into groups. Each group should choose a party website to visit and report back to the class on their assessment of its:**

- **content**
- **presentation.**

**As a class, identify and discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the internet as a means of communication for political parties.**

## Weeding the path

In any pluralist democracy, *support* for individual parties will, almost by definition, increase and decrease at different times (depending on a party's general popularity). Rather than look at individual party voting figures, therefore, we can note the *trend* in voter turnout at major elections is *downward* (although for European elections the recent UK trend has been upward, from a 24% turnout in 1999 to 38% in 2004). Local elections are generally decided on a very low voter turnout (41% in 1994 and 25% in 2003). General elections, therefore, offer a more *reliable* and *valid* measure of general

party popularity; the trend in UK electoral turnout in the post-war period is as follows:

- **1950: 85%**
- **1983: 73%**
- **2001: 59%**
- **2005: 60%**

This type of general downward trend is not restricted to the UK. As the **Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance** (2000) demonstrates, declining voter turnout is a global phenomenon. We can, however, look briefly at the reasons for declining political turnout:

**Technical considerations**: These include factors such as:

- **Outdated electoral rolls** (elections occasionally occur when the list of registered voters has not been updated). The recently deceased, for example, may remain on the electoral register.
- **Failure to register**: For whatever reason, people fail to register to vote (even though required to do so by law).
- **Geographic mobility**: People may be registered in one area but, having moved, fail to update their registration (something quite common among students).

Although technical considerations account for a number of non-voters, they are unlikely to account for the 40% of the electorate who didn't vote in the 2005 general election. **Kitcat** (2002) points to further reasons for declining turnout.

- **Choice**: Where voters are offered a choice between two parties pursuing roughly the same ideological and policy agendas there is less reason to vote since, unless you are particularly committed to a party, you're likely to see little difference between them.
- **Competition**: In situations where the election is considered a 'foregone conclusion' there may be little incentive for any but the most ideologically committed to vote. In addition, the 'first past the post' electoral system can provide strong voting disincentives; in situations where a minority party candidate has no chance of winning, for example, their supporters may simply decide not to vote. The exceptions here serve to reinforce the general rule – **Richard Taylor**, for example, is the only Independent MP in the current UK parliament.
- **Perceptions**: In situations where some parts of the electorate see Parliament and/or the policies of political parties as irrelevant to their immediate needs and concerns, there is little incentive to vote.
- **Protest**: For an unknown number of the electorate the decision not to vote is a conscious statement of protest against either the voting system or the policies of the parties standing in the election.

## Pressure groups

In terms of:

**Membership**, the most recent trend appears to be downward. **Margetts** (2001) argues: 'Even the more successful pressure groups have experienced a reversal of an upward membership trend from the first half of the 1990s.' Greenpeace currently has around 200,000 members, a 50% decline over the past ten years. Having said this, accurate estimates of group membership are not always easy to discover, partly because, as **Jordan** and **Halpin** (2003) argue, the

study of such groups involves three main problems:

- **Definitional**: As we've seen, our ability to define pressure/interest groups in a consistent and coherent fashion is often limited by the blurring of distinctions between pressure groups and new social movements.
- **Numerical**: Estimates of the size of different pressure groups are hampered by the lack of reliable membership data released into the public domain by such groups.
- **Normative**: An idea that relates to how we measure participation. As with political parties, 'participation' can be measured in two different ways – *active* involvement and *passive* involvement (in terms of, for example, donating money but not time and effort to a group) – and these, in turn, can be subdivided into further categories of 'participation'. Deciding what 'level of participation' actually counts as 'participation' is a *methodological problem* whose resolution has important consequences for how we view pressure groups and political participation.

We can also add that, unlike with political parties, the same person may be a member of a number of different pressure groups.

**Support**: Most pressure group participation appears to be relatively *passive*, something that is also true of party participation (where support is measured *objectively* in terms of voting behaviour). This, however, may be a quality of the nature and purpose of pressure groups – to exert influence on political parties and governments. This makes distinctions between 'membership' and 'support' redundant in the sense that they are frequently the same thing – by gathering support *through* (a relatively passive) membership, pressure groups enhance their ability to influence governments and political parties through 'weight of numbers' (they are seen to represent a substantial number of people, although this, in itself, is no guarantee of pressure group effectiveness or success).

**Jordan** and **Halpin** suggest this creates problems for the sociologist when considering questions of 'political participation', since participation is expressed through support that is then operationalised through the organisational structure of the group – the majority of members rarely, if ever, play a *direct* participatory role.

## Social movements

**Social movements** present both *external* problems of definition (how, for example, different types of movement differ from pressure groups) and *internal* problems (the distinction between OSMs and NSMs, for example). In terms of the latter:

**Membership** of OSMs is generally easier to estimate, but this applies mainly to movements, such as trade unions, that have evolved to resemble interest groups. If, for the sake of example, we look at union membership, the trend over recent years has been in two directions:

- **Decline**: According to the **Labour Force Survey** (2005), over the past 25 years both membership *numbers* and the *percentage* of the workforce who are union members have declined (from 13.2 million to 7.3

million and 55% to 28%, respectively). Having said this, we shouldn't lose sight of the fact that trade unions still have a substantial membership.

- **Conglomeration**, in the sense of fewer, but larger, unions. Unison, the largest union with around 1.3 million members, represents workers in public service industries such as the NHS, police, transport and the voluntary sector. The three largest unions now represent nearly 50% of all union members.

While there are specific reasons for the decline in union membership (the decline in traditional forms of manual manufacturing work and an increase in service employment that is less likely to be unionised, the growth of part-time working patterns that are similarly less likely to involve union membership, and so forth), a more general trend, suggested by writers such as **Putnam** (1995), is the decline in *any* kind of organised political participation.

## Weeding the path

Although the available evidence from both parties and pressure groups does suggest a general decline in:

**Organisational participation**, considered in terms of membership, how we *interpret* this evidence is significant. The main question here, therefore, is the extent to which this evidence of decline represents a change in:

- **Individual behaviour**, in the sense of fewer people choosing to overtly participate in such organisations, or
- **Institutional behaviour**, in the sense of changes in the way political organisations operate.

For interest groups, for example, the development of bureaucratic structures and professional hierarchies reflects the environment in which many operate – that of government departments and bureaucracies where 'influential work' is done in committee rooms and offices rather than on 'the street' (through mass demonstrations, for example).

Here, 'decline' is a function of the organisations themselves; that is, they invite a *different form* of political participation, one channelled through both conventional and non-conventional organisational structures. In other words, 'political participation' has become professionalised – carried out by professional negotiators, backed by relatively passive forms of public support in the form of media coverage, donations and membership subscriptions.

This picture is further complicated when we consider:

**New social movements**. This type of political organisation doesn't, by its very nature, lend itself to easy analysis in terms of membership, mainly because NSMs are not 'conventional political organisations' in the way we generally understand the term in relation to parties and pressure groups. NSMs frequently exist 'on the boundaries' of conventional political behaviour and organisation, which makes measuring political participation difficult. There are, however, a couple of ways we can note (if not necessarily *reliably* measure) participation.

**Active participation**: **Margetts** (2001) argues for a 'dramatic upsurge in single-issue protest activity and unconventional forms of political participation' that is ' . . . not accompanied by a rise in membership.

Newer environmental groups rely on symbolic action rather than mass mobilization for their effectiveness'. As **Doherty** (1999), notes, newer forms of environmentalist groups ' . . . have no central organization and no centralized pool of resources and there is a strong ideological commitment to avoiding any institutionalization'.

The idea of 'symbolic action' can, of course, be interpreted in two ways. First, it might represent a *new form* of political action and participation, whereby a relatively small group of *activists* draws attention to a particular set of ideas or grievances by relatively small-scale – but dramatic and hence newsworthy – events. However, it might simply represent the fact that 'symbolic actions' (such as those carried out by Fathers 4 Justice in 2005) are not 'mass demonstrations' precisely *because* such organisations don't actually command very much public support or participation.

A second form of 'participation' is to think about NSMs more generally; for example, rather than concentrate on measuring or assessing participation through overt means (membership numbers, activists, supporters, and so forth), **Martin** (2000) suggests participation can be conceptualised in terms of:

**Cultural participation**; in other words, an assessment of the impact NSMs have made on the cultural life of our society – influencing perceptions, changing the nature of political debate and generally 'changing people's attitudes' to a wide range of issues. This of course either stretches the concept of participation to breaking point (since it's possible to argue that political participation has increased without any overt, measurable growth in such behaviour) or introduces a new and different way of thinking about the concept.

## Digging deeper: Nature and changes

To complete this section we're going to look at political participation in a little more depth, with the focus on:

**Voting behaviour**. Voting (or at the least the opportunity to vote) is one of the main forms of political expression and participation in our society (27 million people voted in the 2005 general election), and, for this reason alone, it's worth examining a range of theories that seeks to explain this type of participation.

When we start to think about explanations for *voting behaviour*, **Hyde** (2001) suggests there are two general models we need to consider.

### Expressive

**Expressive models** focus on the idea that voting behaviour is influenced by a range of factors (such as *primary and secondary socialisation*) that influences both party identification (the particular political perspective we choose) and how we decide to vote. This model has traditionally focused on *social class* as the basis for party identification, although in recent years ideas about the relationship between age, gender and ethnicity have also been incorporated in various ways into the general model.

### Instrumental

**Instrumental models** focus on concepts of individual:

**Self-interest** – voting for a party that promises to lower personal taxation, for example – or

**Issue selection** – such as when a party promotes an issue with which an individual strongly agrees or disagrees.

In some instances people will make calculations about what they believe are the best interests of a particular social group to which they belong (or in some cases the nation as a whole) and vote accordingly.

These models are not mutually exclusive (many of the explanations we outline here have elements of both) and their main purpose is simply to help us think about general ways to classify different models of voting. We can see this more clearly if we look at some examples of *expressive* explanations.

## Social determinist

**Social determinist models** are, somewhat confusingly, among both the earliest and latest models of voting behaviour.

Early models, for example, argued that there was a clear and relatively consistent relationship between social background, usually, but not exclusively, expressed in terms of class and political choice. An (American) example of this approach is **Lazersfeld et al.'s** (1944) argument that voting behaviour is influenced by the socialising ideas and behaviours of the people who surround us (in the family and workplace, for example), an explanation originally proposed to test the idea that the media played a direct and influencing role in people's behavioural choices. Their argument is summed up by their claim that 'social characteristics determine political preference'.

A variation on this general theme is one that introduces, according to **Andersen** and **Heath** (2000), a *two-way* element into the relationship between the social background of the voter and the party for which they vote.

## Parts identification

**Party identification models** suggest people vote for the party that best reflects and matches their particular social background. In other words, the influence of social background (and parents in particular) leads people to associate themselves with particular ideologies and parties. This, as **Gerber** and **Green** (1998) suggest, represents a form of:

**Partisan alignment**, whereby people both see themselves as members of coherent social groups (classes, in particular, in the British context) and associate particular parties with an important component of their overall *social identity*.

In this respect, how political parties present and position themselves is significant for identification – part of a 'two-way communication' process, whereby voters identify with the party that reflects their social background, and parties, in turn, compete with each other to represent particular political constituencies. In Britain, for example, Labour has traditionally associated itself with working-class voters while the Conservative Party has traditionally been identified with middle- and upper-class voters.

## Proximity theory

**Proximity theory** is, according to **Downs** (1957), a refinement of this general model, in the sense that it involves people supporting the party they *believe* is closest to their own particular political beliefs, something that reflects an *expressive model* of voting because people vote for a party *regardless* of whether they feel it has any

chance of winning. **Hope** (2004) has suggested that the concept of:

**Modified proximity voting** takes account of non-voters by demonstrating that people will not vote if no party is considered 'close enough' to their particular position (or 'dominant issue space', as he puts it).

## Weeding the path

The strength of these types of explanation, at least in the recent past, has been that, on a general level, they describe an observable process – the *correlation* between social background and voting behaviour. *Partisan loyalties*, for example, have been a reasonably consistent, general theme in British politics (and possibly even more so in Northern Irish politics where class and religion appear as influential factors in party identification). However, these models have a number of problems.

**Group identities**: The relationship between class (and other forms of identity), although strong in some respects, is not an infallible guide to voting behaviour. We can point to a range of different 'types of voter' who don't conform to this general relationship. These *deviant voters* include:

- **Deferential voters**: They 'defer to legitimate authority'. In this instance, some working-class voters (in particular) support parties (such as the Conservatives in the recent past, according to **McKenzie** and **Silver**, 1972) which they see as 'best equipped' to exercise power.
- **Contradictory voters**: Those whose socialisation gives them 'mixed messages', in the sense, for example, that those experiencing upward or downward social mobility are more inclined to vote for parties representing their *former* social positions.
- **Affluent voters**: This idea was related, in the late 1950s, to the concept of *embourgeoisement* – the claim by **Zweig** (1961) that changes in the class structure were making notions of class identification redundant. The main idea here was that the working class was rapidly disappearing and the middle class rapidly expanding. In a situation where the 'majority of the population were middle class', the idea of party identification appeared less plausible, although this idea itself involves certain problems, not the least being a tendency to oversimplify the nature of both social classes and the class structure. Affluent workers, for example, were considered more likely to vote for parties traditionally associated with the middle classes. **Nordinger** (1967), however, found that 'working-class Tory' voters generally earned less than their Labour-voting peers.

### ✻ SYNOPTIC LINK

**Stratification and differentiation:** The concept of embourgeoisement has been used to argue that the class structure of modern societies (such as Britain and the USA) is converging ('becoming flatter'), in the sense that the 'old divisions between social classes' are no longer relevant to our understanding of social inequality.

This idea led, however, to the concept of:

- **Instrumental voters**: These people voted

for whichever party seemed to offer them the most (whether in terms of higher incomes, lower taxes, higher aspirations or whatever). This group, it was argued, voted *pragmatically* – that is, for whichever party offered the most at a particular time. Party allegiance was, consequently, weak and open to change.

## Branding

We can initially explore this idea through **Lees-Marshment's** (2004) concept of:

**Branding**, a relatively recent form of explanation that can be applied, in different ways, to both *expressive* and *instrumental* voting models. In terms of the *former*, the concept relates to the idea of *consumption patterns* – voters pick and choose their political preferences in ways that 'best fit' their current lifestyles. Thus, rather than broad *expressive* categories like class and gender being significant attachment and identification factors, political parties are assessed on a range of 'lifestyle factors' (including how they are perceived in terms of confirming and enhancing a particular lifestyle).

Parties that are seen as 'fresh, modern and dynamic', for example, appeal to a certain section of the electorate, while parties seen as 'unfashionable' or 'stuck in the past' may similarly be considered 'unappealing'. In other words, voters are likely to support whichever party is best suited to their lifestyle, self-perceptions and aspirations.

Branding also has an *instrumental dimension*, according to **Lees-Marshment** (2004), in that 'British politics is consumer-led, with the main parties acting like businesses, designing their "product" to suit what voters want'. In this respect, parties 'shape their policies' to fit what they believe the electorate finds most attractive. In addition, the idea of 'brand loyalty' may apply here – just as people may buy more expensive products because they 'trust' or are attracted to the brand, the same may apply to political parties.

**Cool Britannia?**
**In the mid-1990s the Labour Party under Tony Blair's leadership made a conscious decision to update its public perception. We'll leave you to judge how successful it was . . .**

## Tactical voting

Brand loyalty is also a possible explanation for:

**Tactical voting** (voting for a party you do not support in situations where your favoured choice has no chance of winning, to prevent the party you least like from winning). By voting for a party they 'least dislike', people indirectly show their support for their favoured party by increasing its chances of victory at a national level.

These ideas suggest the UK may be increasingly:

**Volatile** (or constantly changing) in terms of the support people give to particular

parties at particular times. If this is the case (and it's by no means certain it is), 'voter volatility' may help to explain:

**Instrumental models** of voting behaviour. These come in two distinct forms – those that focus on individual interests and those that focus on group interests – and suggest a more complex relationship between voters and parties than is generally the case with *expressive* models.

## Rational choice

In terms of *individualistic* models, therefore, we can note the idea of:

**Rational choice theory**, based on a:

**Cost-benefit analysis**. **Scott** (2000) defines this idea as 'the profit a person gains in interaction is measured by the rewards received minus the costs incurred'. In this respect voting choices are 'rational' because, as **Martin** (2000) puts it, 'individuals act . . . to maximise their benefits and minimise their costs' which, in terms of voting behaviour, means *instrumental voting* – people vote for whatever party offers them the best (individual) deal. This *basic model*, as **Andersen** and **Heath** (2000) note, is highly *individualistic* in the sense that each voter matches 'their individual issue preferences with party platforms'.

### ✻ SYNOPTIC LINK

**Crime and deviance:** This idea is at the root of all New Right thinking across a range of social behaviours. We can, for example, use it to understand approaches to crime (as well as family life, education, wealth, poverty and welfare and more).

## Weeding the path

The basic theory of 'rational choice' has certain attractions because it explains how people vote on the basis of individual decision-making. In basic terms, people vote 'selfishly' in that decisions to vote for a particular party or candidate are based on what they perceive to be their own best *economic* interests. The strength of the model lies, therefore, in its ability to explain people's *motivations* for the voting choices they make. However, rational choice theory (at least as it's constructed at this individual level of choice) is not without its problems.

## Why vote?

One of the central problems, as **Purdam et al.** (2002) point out, is that the individualistic cost-benefit type of analysis that underpins this version of rational choice fails to explain *why people vote*. In other words, because people cannot *individually* decide the outcome of an election, the *costs* involved, 'such as the time taken to visit the polling station', outweigh the *benefits* because there can be *no direct economic benefit* from the act of voting. This, as **Brennan** and **Hamlin** (2006) point out, has led 'some commentators within the rational actor school of politics' to argue that voting is *irrational*, for two reasons:

- **Information**: No individual voter can have all the information they need about likely benefits to make an informed rational choice about their 'best interests'.
- **Aggregated benefits**: As **Purdam et al.** argue, under this model it is actually

## Growing it yourself: The rational choice dilemma

**We can simulate the rational choice model in the following way. Split the class into groups of four. Each group member ('player') represents a different political interest. Each player has a number (1–4) and players 1–3 should also have a sheet of paper with the numbers 1, 2 and 3 written clearly on it (their ballot paper).**

**The group has ten minutes to discuss who should be elected by the votes of the three players. Player 4 may enter the discussion but cannot vote. At the end of the discussion each player should *secretly* select the number of the player they want to vote for by placing a cross ('X') against their number. They should fold their ballot paper and place it on the table. Player 4 then 'counts the votes' and the player with the most votes is elected.**

**However, each player should strive to act and vote *rationally*. In terms of their own *best interests* they should, therefore, vote for themselves but at the same time seek to convince the other players to vote for them.**

**If each player receives one vote (there is no clear majority), player 4 wins the election. This player should, therefore, do their best to convince the other players to 'vote rationally'.**

**As a class, identify and discuss the conclusions we can draw from the simulation about rational choice models of voting behaviour. Consider how this exercise could be applied to an understanding of tactical voting.**

*rational* for the individual *not* to vote. If individual voters are unable to directly influence an election (and they will incur various costs by voting), their most rational decision would be to let others do the voting since anyone 'is equally able to enjoy the benefits if their preferred party wins the election'.

Although *individualistic* rational choice models have their problems, alternative versions stress the idea of 'group rationality'; that is, rather than seeing instrumental voting in terms of specific benefits to individuals, benefits are considered in more general terms at the level of social groups or classes. For example:

**Partisan alignment** is similar to the party identification model in the sense that an individual's class background, for example, influences their voting behaviour. However, the major difference is that people vote *instrumentally*; in other words, they vote for the party that best represents their economic interests *as a class* (or a *gender*, or an *ethnic group*). **Butler** and **Stokes** (1974) argued that in Britain the two main political parties have, historically, strong class associations; people understand these different interests and vote accordingly for the party that most clearly represents their class interests.

More recently, this type of analysis has been extended to include *partisan alignment* based on:

**Ethnicity**. George **Galloway**, representing the Respect Party, overturned a 10,000

Labour majority to win the Bethnal Green and Bow seat in the 2005 general election. His successful campaign targeted, and generally won, the large Muslim vote in the constituency.

### Weeding the path

The 'problem of deviant voters' we noted earlier applies equally to this model of voting behaviour. In addition, although **Butler** and **Stokes** argued that class was 'pre-eminent among the factors used to explain party allegiance in Britain', not everyone agreed with this assessment – for many the relationship between social class and voting behaviour was by no means as clear-cut as they suggested. An alternative interpretation, therefore, might be:

**Partisan dealignment**, an explanation based on the idea that *partisan identities*, such as those based around social class, occupation and the like, have progressively broken down in such a way that **Crewe** (1984) argues: 'No form of partisan alignment theory can account for the changes in voting behaviour we have witnessed in Britain over the past 20–25 years.'

## Partisan dealignment

In basic terms, therefore, this model involves two main ideas:

- **Dealignment**: It is no longer possible to correlate ('align') voting behaviour with the kind of purely *expressive* factors we've previously discussed. As **Crewe et al.** (1977) claim: ' . . . none of the major occupational groups [in Britain] now provides the same degree of solid and consistent support for one of the two major parties as was the case in the earlier post-war period.' More recently, **Heath** (1999) has observed that 'Labour gained relatively more votes [at the 1997 general election] in the middle class than it did in the working class, leading to a marked *class dealignment*'.
- **Partisanship**: Although some form of partisan decision-making is, by definition, part and parcel of the electoral process (people have to make *choices*, after all), the argument here is that such choices are increasingly:
  - **Issue based**; in other words, electoral support for any given party at any given election is relatively *fluid* – large numbers of votes are effectively 'up for grabs' by whichever party addresses (and promises to resolve) the particular 'issues of the moment' uppermost in the electorate's collective consciousness. A classic example here might be the Conservative victory in the 1982 general election. Although trailing badly in every opinion poll leading up to the election, a crucial issue (Britain's involvement in the Falklands war against Argentina) may have proved decisive in re-electing the Conservatives by rallying national sentiment behind 'the party in power'.

## Explanations

Explanations for dealignment generally focus on the idea of:

**Fragmentation**, something that takes two basic forms:

- **Class fragmentation** involves the idea that classes, in a globalised world, are no longer coherent and effective social

groupings. People, in short, have less attachment to their class in contemporary societies than they did in the past, and party identification based on class is consequently no longer a viable explanation for voting behaviour.

## ✻ SYNOPTIC LINK

**Stratification and differentiation:** Part of the reason for this (suggested) fragmentation are the changes in the class structure outlined in this chapter.

- **Political fragmentation** has developed whereby voters are no longer faced with a relatively simple choice between two distinctive political parties (something reflected in the decline in the relative number of votes each party receives). This involves both the electoral presence of a major *third party* (the Liberal Democrats) and the presence of a range of nationalist and single-issue political parties that extend voter choice.

Various explanations have been put forward for political fragmentation.

**State overload** theory, for example, argues that as political parties have increasingly promised to provide the electorate with all kinds of benefits in return for their vote, people have become sceptical about the ability of governing parties to deliver on their promises.

**Legitimation crisis** relates to the idea that, in a global political economy, national governments are unable to influence events (or 'deliver on their promises'). In this respect, where governments and parties are seen to be prisoners of events beyond their control, it matters little which party is actually in government – something that creates a legitimation crisis that leads to voter disillusionment (and a consequent decline in political participation and the numbers voting for major parties).

As **Bromley et al.** (2004) argue: 'There has been a decline in levels of trust in government and confidence in the political system . . . and confidence has fallen further since 1997.'

**Consumption politics** links to the idea of *issue-based voting* in the sense that, as **Himmelweit et al.** (1985) suggest, voting behaviour should be seen as a form of 'consumer decision'. Deciding how to vote, just like deciding which washing powder to buy, becomes a matter of weighing the alternatives and plumping for the party that seems to offer the most, an idea that links into **Lees-Marshment's** (2004) concept of 'political branding' which we discussed previously.

## Weeding the path

Although partisan dealignment models are attractive in that they both question the idea of a simple relationship between voting and expressive attachments and offer a general explanation of 'voter volatility', they are not without criticism.

**Issues**: **Evans** and **Andersen** (2004) argue that while political issues are important in terms of voting behaviour, we need to look beneath the surface of a simple relationship between 'what parties are offering' and 'what voters want' to understand *why* people see some issues, but not others, as important. To do this, they argue, we need to see:

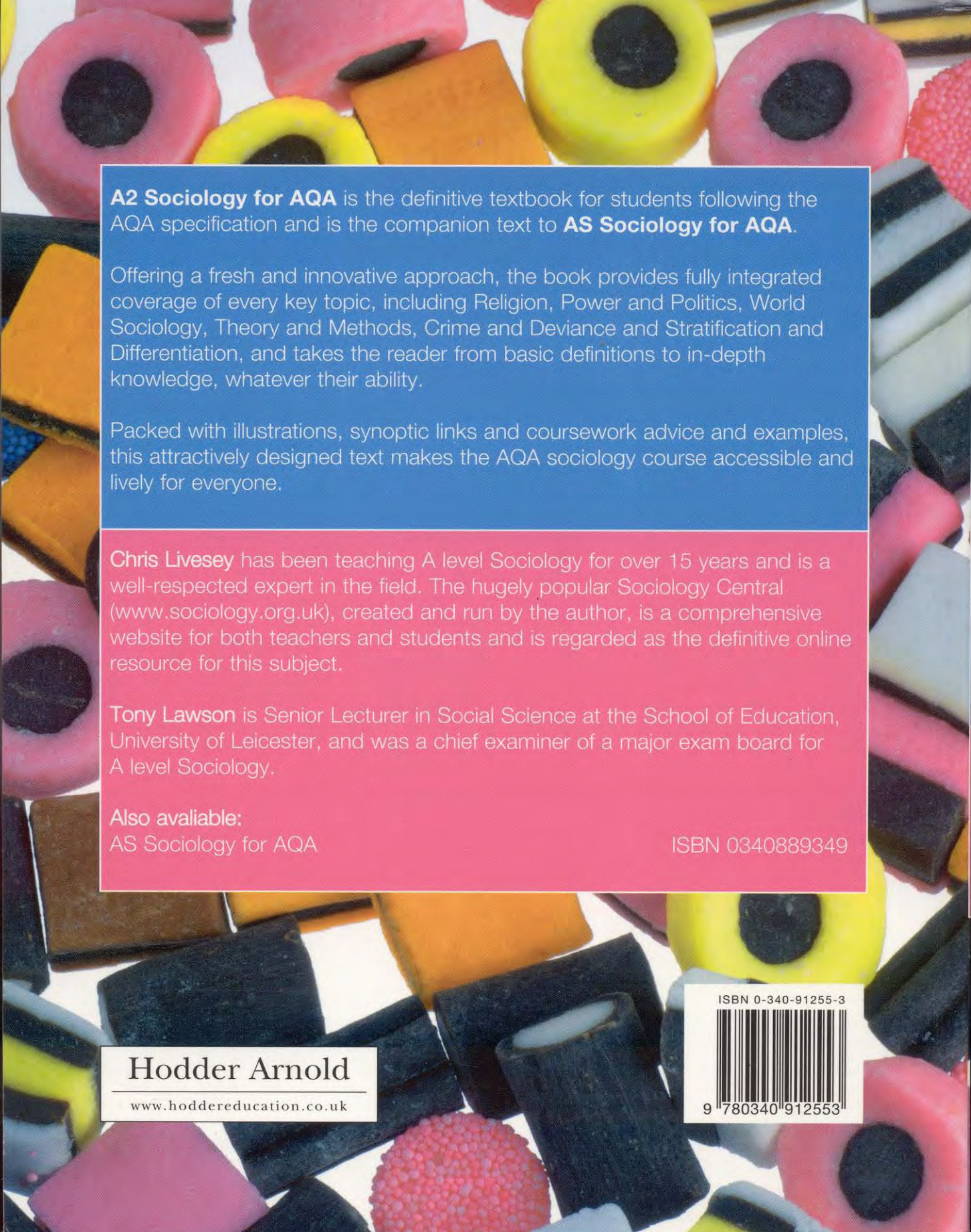
**Partisan orientations** as being the defining factor; in other words, people see

certain issues as important (both personally and in the wider context) precisely *because* of their pre-existing political situations and influences. For a working-class voter, therefore, issues surrounding things like unemployment, the minimum wage, and so forth, are 'issues of class' precisely because class background, socialisation, and so forth, make them important (in the same way that they may be important to a rich, upper-class voter for different reasons).

## Expressive judgement

**Expressive instrumentalism**: In a related way, **Brennan** and **Hamlin** (2006) argue that *apparently instrumental* forms of voting are themselves always based on some form of *expressive* bedrock. In other words, when people vote, they do so ' . . . not to bring about an intended electoral outcome (action we term "instrumental") but simply to express a view or an evaluative judgement over the options (action we term "expressive")'.

In other words, voting behaviour (even when it *appears* instrumental and issue-based) can actually be rationally explained only in terms of how people perceive the act of voting (as a *duty*, for example), something that, ultimately, is rooted in an *expressive* understanding of their individual roles in a collective undertaking. As **Brennan** and **Hamlin** argue: 'I can satisfy my expressive desire to voice my opinion that Z should happen, without believing that doing so will actually bring Z about, and, indeed, without any expectation that Z will happen. It is, in this case, the simple expression of the opinion that matters.'



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