

“A” Level Sociology

Resource-Based Learning

Power and Politics

Unit P4: Political Socialisation (1)

Politics and Political Socialization: Voting Behaviour

As we have seen, all societies develop some form of basic political organization (in the widest sense of the concept), whether this organization be based upon families, clans, elites, parties or whatever. Political organization, in this sense, involves an understanding of the nature of the relationship between:

Those who rule and
Those who are ruled over in society.

In this respect, we are concerned here with the analysis of a number of related ideas:

1. The different ways that societies can be politically organized (in terms of political systems). The focus of attention here will be modern political systems.
2. The process of political socialization, whereby people come to learn about the society in which they live.
3. The organization of political representation and explanations for voting behaviour in modern political democracies.

1. Political Systems:

Political systems can be divided conveniently into two major forms:

- a. Dictatorship (or totalitarian) societies.
- b. Democratic societies.

Each of these two basic forms has a number of specific variations which will be outlined below.

a. Totalitarian Societies:

Briefly note what you think might be some of the main features of totalitarian societies.

Carl Friedrich ("Totalitarianism", 1954) characterized such political systems as involving four basic elements:

1. Totalist Ideology.

This represents a political doctrine to which everyone in society adheres (or is forced to adhere to). Such an ideology is called "inclusive", insofar as it permeates all sections of social organization (family, education, etc.). It is not only the dominant ideology in a society, it is the only permissible form of ideology (it might be useful to think about the doctrine of National Socialism in Germany (1933 - 1945) in this respect).

2. A Single Party Organization.

The Party is committed to the expression of a particular political doctrine (whether that doctrine be communism, fascism or whatever). Two basic forms of Party organization tend to exist:

- a. Dictatorship headed by a single powerful figure (or figurehead).
- b. Dictatorship headed by a powerful group of people (an oligarchy).

3. Secret Police.

In this respect, there exists an ideological policing system that exists to uphold the existing political order (as opposed to the simple upholding of a legal order).

4. Monopoly Control.

Of all areas of society - economic, political and ideological.

Totalitarian regimes have tended, historically, to be "transitional" regimes, insofar as they have tended to have arisen in times of acute political / economic crises (for example, Germany under Hitler, the Soviet Union under Stalin, Cambodia under Pol Pot).

The Soviet Union, for example, was clearly totalitarian under Stalin but, following his death, began to exhibit signs of a "softer" form of totalitarianism (Rule by the Party, one-party elections, "toleration" of economic deviance and so forth).

Totalitarian societies have, historically, been transitional / unstable because:

- a. They fail to address / resolve the structural problems / crises that brought them into existence. The Soviet Union, for example, has eventually collapsed into a number of more-or-less antagonistic Nation States following the failure of "State Communism" to resolve the economic / political problems of the Union.
- b. Pressure from democratic states for change has forced gradual internal changes within the political / economic structure of such societies ("Human Rights" and so forth).
- c. Where power is highly concentrated and centralized, the death / demise of powerful individuals has tended to bring about a political crisis which, if not resolved, has tended to lead to the development of more democratic forms of political organization.
- d. Totalitarian regimes tend to be economically / politically corrupt (since there are few checks and balances upon the exercise of power) and fail to translate power into authority (in a way that is a feature of successful democratic societies).

Explain in your own words the phrase "a failure to translate power into authority".

b. Democratic Societies.

Briefly note what you think might be some of the main features of democratic societies.

There are two basic forms of democratic organization that we need to note:

a. Participatory (Direct) Democracy.

In crude terms, everyone in society has an immediate, direct, say in the decision-making process - the classic example of this being Ancient Greece where citizens (a small minority) regularly assembled to debate, take decisions and so forth.

Modern societies are too large and complex for this form to be of any real use, but elements of direct democracy have been incorporated into modern democratic political systems:

- a. Referenda in various European countries (including Britain, where the last referendum was over entry into the European Community. Referenda were held, in the mid-1970's, by the Callaghan Labour Government, in Scotland and Wales (but not England) concerning devolution).
- b. State referenda in the United States, where in addition to voting for political representatives, people may be asked to vote on a range of different propositions (concerning taxation, criminal law and so forth). The inclusion of such propositions requires the proposers to collect a specified number of signatures, from those eligible to vote, requesting that such a proposition be included in the ballot.

Outline some of the advantages and disadvantages of participatory democracy.

b. Representative Democracy.

In this type of political organization, decisions are taken by the elected representatives of a particular society / community (a delegatory version of this may exist, whereby elected representatives are mandated, by their electorate, to vote in certain ways).

In Britain, however, we live in a non-delegatory democracy. Representatives are elected and then allowed to vote in ways that they believe "represent the interests of their electorate". In theory, political representatives speak for their constituents in Parliament, but the Party system does, in practice, tend to mean that political representatives "toe-the-Party-line" in Parliament.

There are two basic variations on representative democracy:

- a. Multi-Party democracies ("Liberal-Democratic" societies):

In this system, there is a choice of political parties, representing different political, economic and ideological interests.

b. One-Party Democracies:

The element of choice, in this respect, is between different candidates, rather than parties. Candidates represent divergent policies within a one-party system of government.

2. Political Socialization.

Political behaviour, like any other form of behaviour, has to be learned and this learning process involves not only an awareness of the specific mechanics of political organization, it also involves an ideological dimension. As Rush and Althoff ("An Introduction To Political Sociology") note:

"Political learning begins at the age of three and is well-established by the age of seven. Early stages include attachment to school, recognition of living in a particular country and a simple sense of patriotism. This is followed by a recognition of political authority, the police, prime minister, queen and national flag. By nine or ten there is an increasing awareness of voting, democracy, civil liberty and the role of citizens in the political system."

The various agencies of political socialization should be quite familiar to you by now (family, school, mass media and so forth) and I do not propose to go into these here, since reference will be made to their role in the following section - an analysis of voting behaviour in modern political systems (with special reference to post-war Britain).