A2 Sociology

The Role of Political Parties and Movements, Pressure / Interest Groups and the Mass Media in the Political Process

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Parties seek political power. Their main objective is to control the machinery and administration of government.

Parties bring people who share a particular political philosophy together. Ideas are articulated (through the media, for example) in terms of social policies.

Members normally pay a subscription to the party and play roles relating to fundraising, policy development, the selection of political candidates and so forth.

Parties reflect the broad ideological principles of those who vote for its representatives.

In the political process different parties represent different interests in a relatively orderly way. Social stability involves the orderly operation of politics (free-and-fair elections, the transfer of power between elected and dismissed governments etc.). The legitimacy of the political process is legitimised by people’s acceptance and participation.

Parties control the general machinery of government, providing a (functional) link between government and the governed.

The electorate place politicians and parties in a position of trust (government) and require politicians to be accountable by submitting, periodically, to a renewal of trust through elections.
Pressure / Interest groups

Wilson (1990) “Organisations, separate from government, that attempt to influence public policy”

Smith (1995): two ways pressure groups influence parties

Direct action

Indirect action

Includes things like demonstrations and political events.

Example: Interest group using a combination of these two forms. The Countryside Alliance: Direct action involved mass public demonstrations and “political events” (such as interrupting a parliamentary debate). Indirect action through the media.

Types

Causal or Promotional

Exist to promote a particular cause - representing the interests of the “politically unrepresented”. Organisationally, the general membership / support more-likely to have an indirect (non-personal) interest in the cause being promoted (an open membership).

Sectional or Protective

Represent the common interests of a particular social group. Organisationally, members have a direct involvement in the particular interests being promoted (a relatively closed membership). Example: Trade Union or Professional Association (such as the British Medical Association).

Episodic

Supporting or opposing a specific cause or issue (such as the proposal to build a new airport). Once the issue has been resolved, the group disbands.

Insider

Groups able to directly lobby significant (politically powerful) politicians on a face-to-face basis. “Access to power” gives insider groups a powerful advantage, but blurs the distinction between parties and pressure groups.

Blumenthal (2005): Questions of possible “undue political influence” and corruption. Those closest to political power can further their own, personal, interests and those of powerful but unrepresentative groups.

Outsider

No direct access to government and political power. Usually publicise their particular area of interest through the media. For example, using advertising campaigns or creating “media events” (demonstrations and publicity stunts, for example) to publicise the group’s message.

Publicity stunts: Fathers For Justice specialised in public events designed to bring their argument (a lack of access to their children following divorce) to media - and hence public - attention.

Demonstrations and public meetings (the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, for example).

Direct action - in 2000, Greenpeace supporters destroyed a field of Genetically-Modified maize as a protest against GM crops.
Groups (like Trades Unions and business organisations - such as the CBI) act as conduits and sounding-boards for government policies; they may also originate policies for parties.

Pressure groups are a bridge between the State and the interests of powerless groups.

Some groups provide expert advice and information that acts as an “oppositional force” to political parties. Both explicit pressure groups (such as Greenpeace) and implicit pressure groups (such as the media) provide “checks and balances” to political power.

Involvement in pressure groups reduces the “democratic deficit” and creates a more active political process.

Public awareness and understanding of social issues and problems is increased.

Pressure groups encourage political diversity; sensitive issues, such as campaigns against child abuse, can be promoted by interest groups in situations and ways that are not necessarily open to parties.
"Old" refers to the focus, behaviour, concern and organisation of this type, rather than the idea they no longer exist. 

**Barnatt and Scotch (1999):** OSMs focus on "Issues of rights and the distribution of resources". 

**Examples:** American Civil Rights movement in the 1960's and the Trade Union movement in the UK.

**Roth (2003):** "Rights" (OSM) and "Lifestyles" (NSM) distinction not hard-and-fast. Many NSMs address "old problems" like unemployment and poverty. 

**Bottomore (1991)**: some NSMs have developed out of and alongside OSMs.

**Della Porta and Diani (1999)**

The “movement as a whole” is loosely structured. People come together as a movement on the basis of:

- Shared beliefs
- Conflict issues
- Protests

**Synoptic Link Theory and Methods**

Link types of feminism to modernity and postmodernity.

Especially issues of national and global significance. Concerns of movement adherents 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.

**Schweingruber (2005):** Social movements involve: “Continuous, large-scale, organised collective action, motivated by the desire to enact, stop, or reverse change in some area of society”.

**Synoptic Link**

Theory and Methods

Link types of feminism to modernity and postmodernity.
Providing an alternative to prevailing social norms. The focus is on developing different ways of doing things. **Example:** Home rather than State schooling.

Focus on “redeeming others” - for example, converting them to a new and different lifestyles. **Example:** Green Politics

Schweingruber (2005): Classifies movements by the **level** of change they advocate and the **target** of such change.

Focus on changing society - **incremental** (slow and cumulative) rather than revolutionary. **Example:** Liberal feminism

Focus on the overthrow (violent or otherwise) of an existing political order and its replacement by a new social order.

OSMs and NSMs as focus of political dissent - acting as “channels and voices” for a range of social groups to promote change. **Example:** Trade Unions and social class / Gay Liberation movement and sexuality.

Provide representation for the “politically marginalised” - those whose ideas and interests have been “pushed to the political margins”.

Not organised, in the way parties and interest groups are organised, to either directly exercise political power or influence how it is distributed. Significant role in the “mobilisation of ideas” in any society.

Provide alternative sources of political dissent, ways of living and associating that generate “new ideas”, “ways of seeing” the world and pressure for social change.
Monitoring

The activities of parties, groups and factions.

Interpreting

The significance and meaning of political behaviour.

Reporting

Political activities and events and encouraging public participation.

Informing

A “surveillance role” that makes politicians accountable and responsive to the electorate.

Discipline

The extent to which the media “act independently” of political controls - both overt (censorship) and covert (the particular relationship the media have with parties and groups). The nature of this relationship may result in favourable political coverage, unfavourable coverage or no coverage at all.

Salience

How different issues are presented or ignored within the media. Some types of information have different levels of salience at different times in the political process, with the role of media organisations being to “set the political agenda” (deciding, in effect, what issues are politically significant).

Role

The extent to which the media “act independently” of political controls - both overt (censorship) and covert (the particular relationship the media have with parties and groups). The nature of this relationship may result in favourable political coverage, unfavourable coverage or no coverage at all.

Synoptic Link

Issues relating to the role and effect of the Mass Media in modern societies are discussed throughout the AS Mass Media chapter.

How information presented to the public, in terms of both positive and negative coverage of particular policies, politicians and groups. This process is significant in terms of the type of information the media are able (or willing) to place in the public domain.

Besley et al (2002): Conventional ways the media contribute to the political process.
New Political Processes

Focus

Milieu

Individualistic
A preoccupation with the development of identity-based politics

Global
Movements that transcend national forms of political organisation and process.

Globalisation
The economic, political and cultural setting within which traditional forms of party, pressure group, social movement and media have historically developed is transformed by:

Economic changes in the structure of society (and the growth of a “new middle class”)

New Social Movements

Power

Process

Organisation

Decentralised Networks

New forms of social movement change the way we view political process, in two main ways:

Synoptic Link
Theory and Method / Stratification and Differentiation
The concept of post-industrial society can be related debates about modernity and postmodernity and applied to contemporary changes in the class structure.

NSMs embrace a diversity of issues traditionally viewed in terms of class, gender and ethnicity (anti-globalisation, sexualities, Black Power and beyond). Concepts of power, however, relate to ideas about identity and lifestyles rather than economic inequalities.

A distinguishing feature of NSMs is their lack of formal organisational structure (which makes it difficult for governments to relate to - and involve - such movements in conventional political processes). Although they lack conventional organisational structures, this doesn’t mean NSMs are “disorganised”; rather, organisation is decentralised.

Patten (2000): “The defining feature of contemporary social movements is their commitment to cultural transformation at the level of social relations and political identities”.

Are the “rules of the political game” changing?

Is a postmodern politics developing where the ideas, activities and behaviours of NSMs have consequences for both national and international political processes?

March (1995): “The Internet is no mere static repository of information, but a place of action…”

Patten (2000): NSMs are constructed around “non-institutionalized networks of groups and individuals”. 

Carroll (1992): NSM’s represent movements: “…through which new identities are formed, new ways of life are tested, and new forms of community are prefigured”.

Focus on universal issues (such as the meaning of identity) through “connected networks” (facilitated by information technology) of like-minded individuals across the globe.
Organisational structures reflect two forms of operation:

- Physical operation
- Mental operation

NSMs are a different form of “political operation” located within a different form of political process. Objective is to exert influence (directly and indirectly on governments) by developing new forms of association, relationship and political practice.

**Welsh** (2001): NSMs as “Agents of innovation and transformation inescapably within but apart from systems”.

Modern communication methods (such as mobile phones and computers) used to connect dispersed “membership”.

**Cox** (1996): Move “beyond the language of social movements” to embrace the idea of NSMs as:

- Counter Cultures

Seeking to influence globally-networked political processes that address “global problems” - environmental destruction, poverty, slavery, sweated labour, disease...

**Networks within Networks**

**Problems**

**Differences**

Patten (2000)

Differences between NSMs and pressure groups should not be over-stated. Although they may use different methods and be organised differently, their general objectives (to influence national government policies) frequently converge.

**Democracy**

NSMs not automatically “more democratic” than other types of political organisation. They may “reflect specific interests just as easily as parties and pressure groups”.

**Competition**

**Transgression**

Just as New Social Movements may attempt to form political parties, established parties and pressure groups have responded to “changing national and global political landscapes” by focusing on issues, such as environmentalism and identity politics that have conventionally been the preserve of New Social Movements.

**Engagement**

New social movements try to influence national political processes and parties - they do not simply “by-pass” these significant political channels of influence.

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Exam Questions

40 marks
Evaluate the view that political pressure and interest groups have become more effective means of influencing the political process than seeking representation through political parties.

8 marks
Identify and briefly explain two ways political parties use the mass media to compete for votes.

40 marks
Evaluate the role of the mass media in the political process.