PARTIES AND POLITICAL SYSTEMS IN EUROPE

1. Political system theory[1]

Estimated studying time: 30 minutes

System theory

Political system theory is generally traced back to the work of David Easton (1957). Easton intentionally constructed a simple model that belongs to the behaviorist school of thought – it considers the system as a "black box" that receives inputs from its environment (expectations and support) and it answers by producing outputs (policy decisions). Although this is a very simplified way to look at politics, its value is in the ability to provide a general schematic for analyzing a wide range of political systems. Easton's model can be applied to any system regardless when or where it existed.

What is a system?

In general terms, a system is a group of elements that are interconnected in some way. As these elements influence each other, systems are usually more than the sum of their parts.

For example, elements of a party system are political parties, but a party system can be characterized with more than the parties that constitute it. For example, the German right-wing and left-wing parties, the CDU and the SDP governed in a grand coalition several times. In other countries, this was impossible due to a number of reasons – the relationships and the patterns of interactions between parties were different.

How do we differentiate a system from its environment?

To do so, we need to determine what belongs to the system and what doesn't. According to Easton, the basic elements of a political system are political actions that are binding for the entire society. In another context he calls this *the authoritative allocation of values.* These

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systems are constantly interacting with their environments, connected to it by the inputs and outputs.

Just because something has political significance, it is not an element of the political system. A bicycle club is not a part of the political system but it may generate inputs (e.g. Build more bicycle lanes!) that influence decision-making.

It may seem surprising that political action is the main element instead of institutions like parliaments for example. But let's not forget that we are talking about a generalized model! There are many types of legislative bodies and not all political systems in history included parliaments. However, making and ratifying rules, enforcing them and debating about them was always present. The political action was often structured into different institutions over time.

Other models of system theory

Gabriel Almond built upon the foundations laid down by Easton. He also recognized that institutions may differ but the functions remain the same. According to him, inputs are converted into outputs with the use of certain capabilities:

Conversion functions:

1. Political socialization and recruitment: The system teaches behavioral patterns, roles and rules.

   In democratic political systems, there are certain behavioral norms that contribute to sustaining the system itself. For example, after the election, the defeated party "ritually" congratulates the winner. This is not just common courtesy, but a formal recognition of the result as legitimate.

2. Articulation of interests: Representing the needs and aspirations of the community.

3. Aggregation of interests: Collecting and organizing the interests of the community.

4. Formation and enforcement of rules based on proposals.

   All individuals and communities have needs. In political systems, specialized institutions (mainly political parties) collect these needs, organize them and represent them in the form of messages, promises and programs. If a party gains power, then they attempt to fulfill these needs.

5. Political communication: Mediation of information

Capabilities:

1. Extractive: The political system can take away rights and possessions to sustain itself.

For example, by taxation or historically, tithe. It can also extract certain rights from society – there are certain state monopolies and not just in the economic sense, as the state has a monopoly on legitimate violence.

2. Regulative: Prescription, prohibition and incentivization of certain behaviors.

   Creating rules, laws and decrees is a basic function of political systems.

3. Distributive: (Re)distribution of wealth, services, statuses.

   Generally, this is related to the redistribution of wealth taken away with the extractive capability. Besides wealth, status and right could also be redistributed.

4. Symbolic: Representing values, using political symbols.

   The celebration of national identity, commemoration of historic events, anniversaries are typical

5. Responsive: Reaction to environmental inputs.

   Democracy, at least in theory, is characterized by a high degree of responsivity as the voters have control over the system by participating in periodic and free elections.

Stable political systems dynamically convert inputs into outputs and if this cycle is perfect then the system is in equilibrium. However, in real life, there will always be certain demands that cannot be satisfied and some decisions that are received negatively. Perfect equilibrium is theoretical.

An important remark by Almond is that inputs may emerge inside the system – for example, the political elite may have certain demands that act as inputs.

Literature

Almond, G. (1965). A Developmental Approach to Political Systems. *World Politics, 17*(2), 183-214. doi:10.2307/2009347

Easton, D. (1957). An Approach to the Analysis of Political Systems. *World Politics, 9*(3), 383-400. doi:10.2307/2008920

Questions

1. Explain how political systems interact with their environment!
2. What is the basic element of a political system and why do we consider it important?
3. How can we differentiate a system from its environment?
4. What is the main function of a political system according to David Easton?

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5. What it the AGIL scheme and who created it?
6. Explain the capabilities of political systems according to Gabriel Almond!
7. What is the relationship between the distributive and the extractive capabilities?
8. What would be the output of the symbolic capability?
9. When do we consider a political system stable?
10. Give some examples on where inputs may emerge!

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