A
Systems
Analysis
of
Political
Life

David Easton

A Systems Analysis of Political Life

DAVID EASTON

To Sylvia

A SYSTEMS ANALYSIS OF POLITICAL LIFE

Preface to the Phoenix Edition

The appearance in paperback of *A Framework for Political Analysis* and *A Systems Analysis of Political Life* speaks to the continuing concern for basic theory in political science and elsewhere. It testifies to the fact that even though in the 1970s interest in knowledge fundamental to the whole discipline of political science declined in favor of applied knowledge, this interest has by no means disappeared.

It is not difficult to account for the movement away from basic research, although the normal and expected explanation does not apply. Social scientists have often observed that research swings like a pendulum between fact-gathering and theory-building. However valid this observation may be for political research, it does not properly describe or account for what happened to political science during the 1970s. The discipline has experienced less difficulty today than in the past in balancing empirical work with theory construction. Rather, the decline in interest in basic research is a function of a different kind of shift, one that has led to the substitution of one set of substantive interests (policy analysis) for another (basic research), and this outcome is independent of the theory/fact axis.

During the 1950s and '60s, if any one aspiration dominated the perspectives of political science, it was the hope that the behavioral movement and its offshoots would be able to make some contribution to a basic understanding of how political systems operate. Indeed, critics of traditional political science typically complained about past tendencies to apply knowledge prematurely, before this knowledge had passed beyond informed common sense. One of the objectives of greater rigor in research, usually associated with quantification, was to increase the reliability of our understanding. Only as such reliability improved would political scientists be in a position to offer sound advice to policy makers for coping with social problems.

Whether or not in practice we were able, as a profession, to resist the temptation to offer advice is a different matter. But at the very least the repeatedly expressed desire and intention to search for fundamental knowledge gave a new tone to the discipline. Ours was now the traditional goal of science, namely, fundamental understanding as the founda-

tion on which applied knowledge could ultimately be built. Incentives and rewards tended to go to those whose research seemed to promise movement toward this ideal.

During this period of commitment to fundamental knowledge, criteria for the selection of areas of research were supposed to be set by the needs of basic understanding. By the seventies, however, for reasons that had become only too apparent during the turbulent changes of the sixties, the substantive focus of political science, in step with the other social sciences, had shifted radically. What now began to count as important research was more likely to be determined by the extent to which it could contribute immediately to the solution or amelioration of some urgent policy problems—pollution, dwindling energy reserves, conservation of resources, urban decline, unrehabilitative caging of persons in prisons, health services, and the like.

To the extent that basic questions continued to be in tune with the times, they were likely to revolve around two sets of issues: How can we improve our understanding of the determinants and consequences of policy outputs? And how can we account for our earlier preoccupation with basic matters as against current policy concerns? The latter issue has directed much of the theoretical energy of the discipline toward epistemological problems that are by no means superficial in character. In the outcome, however, political research began to display in the seventies a great concern for the here and now, discounting the future somewhat heavily.

It is understandable, of course, that in a complex and rapidly changing world we should get satisfaction from addressing ourselves to what look like immediately tractable issues. However, if we should fail to resolve them because of our lack of understanding of the fundamental forces at work, we would later be disappointed if not disillusioned, for in all likelihood we may then be faced with political problems even more recalcitrant than those with which we are forced to deal today. The mere fact that we now address ourselves to policy matters is no evidence that we know how to cope with them or even how to reduce their urgency. We are already meeting types of resistance to change and ignorance of the effects of policy that will probably breed new and higher levels of frustration. The political consequences of the disillusionment that may be occasioned by our failures may, in later years, lead to new kinds of political turmoil at a higher level of distress than in the 1960s. This will lay the basis for new and more urgent issues which we will then have to face.

Clearly, the future might look a little less dismal if we were to discount it somewhat less heavily. If concurrent with our necessary attention to

policy matters we were to continue our pursuit of basic knowledge, we as social scientists would at least have a chance of finding ourselves in a position, at some time in the future when things may be even worse, to offer more reliable advice than we can at present.

If I may presume to remark on it, the decision to issue in paperback the present two books—books that are explicitly intended to deal with basic rather than policy concerns—suggests that there remains a serious devotion to long-run considerations about how political systems operate. The discipline has not in fact discounted the future entirely. Despite the constant overshadowing danger of catastrophic destruction through nuclear warfare, there is some awareness that perhaps in the long run we may not all be dead, at least as a social system, Keynes's aphorism to the contrary notwithstanding. I interpret a continuing interest in general theory as one expression of this commitment to the future.

My comments up to this point, however, threaten to separate theory and practice more sharply than the history of science requires or permits. Theory is not always so remote from day-to-day practice as it may seem. Even though theory is oriented to fundamental understanding, peculiar things often happen on the way to long range goals. It has frequently been commented on in the natural sciences that discoveries thought to be purely a function of the logical development of a science rather than of the pressure from some urgent social need often surprise us with their unsuspected applicability to immediate and urgent practical concerns. In the case of systems analysis as well, what was considered to be basic has also turned out to have implications for immediate purposes. Two among a number of instances are worth mentioning. Although lacking the dramatic impact of those in the natural sciences, they do demonstrate the policy relevance of a theory that has at times been criticized for its apparent remoteness from the day-to-day affairs of political life. They also reveal the unexpected social dividends of theory construction.

In the development of systems analysis it had seemed to me that a critical variable with which political science has consistently if unsystematically dealt has been the input of support. For reasons explained in my writings, in all political systems it is useful to conceive of this support as being directed to three basic objects: the authorities, the regime, and the political community. Variations in levels of support for such objects help us to understand many vital aspects of the operation of political systems.

This part of systems analysis was developed prior to and, therefore, independently of the sharp and rapid changes in social values and practices during the sixties and early seventies. The political events that occurred at that time in most industrialized countries gave rise to a body

of facts that seemed to be looking for a theory to provide them with some order and meaning. In the world at large, the stirring of the student generation, the emerging self-awareness of various ethnic groups, the gathering resistance against racism and sexism; in the United States, the temporary mobilization of the black ghettos, Vietnam, Watergate; in France, the student revolt—these and similar events all served to nibble away at the trust and confidence in governing authorities in mass industrialized societies. Questions were raised about the governability of contemporary political systems, and the thought that there was a crisis in the legitimacy of political authority even became a small cornerstone of American foreign policy for a while.

What was at work in this period was precisely what systems analysis, at a theoretical level, had sought to draw to the attention of political science. The sixties and seventies saw a distinct decline in the input of support (that is, of trust and legitimacy) for all political objects—the authorities, the regime, and the political community—in varying degrees depending on time and place.

Events in that period seemed to have caught up with theory. A body of concepts was already waiting in the wings for use in understanding these totally unexpected happenings and for putting them into a coherent context. What needed to be worked out was the exact nature and extent of the erosion of support for each of the objects, the effects of the decline of support for any one object on each of the others, the reasons for the loss of support, the particular consequences and, of course, the adequacy of a systems conceptualization of this whole area of political experience. The work of E. N. Muller, J. Dennis, Arthur Miller, J. Citrin, A. Finifter, J. Tannenhaus, G. R. Boynton, J. Wahlke, T. Okamura, and K. Monroe among numerous others clearly moves in this direction. It would be difficult indeed to go to the roots of events in these two historical watershed decades and to interpret their actual and potential consequences without casting them in terms that at least resemble those of support conceptualization. Following this period, the rich literature on support, trust, legitimacy, and alienation testifies to the unexpected pertinence of this part of systems analysis for social concerns.

Similarly, systems analysis anticipated and has been able to provide an initial theoretical ordering for another set of political problems associated with events of the same decades. During the sixties, members of democratic systems came to realize that representation is not enough. Even if electoral practices were improved and legislators were willing to listen more attentively to their constituents, and even if governmental policies were more responsive to popular demands, in fact many of the

policies of governments seemed not to achieve their intended results. In the United States the poverty program of the Johnson Administration was a case in point. Even before the Vietnam War diverted money and energies from the program, not only did it seem to have great difficulty in achieving its objectives, but it may even have inadvertently con-tributed to increasing poverty or confirming the poor in their existing conditions. Recognition dawned on social scientists that good intentions, even actual decisions to implement them, and vast financial and human resources may not be enough. Somehow success in meeting goals, even if the authorities could be persuaded of their merit, seemed to elude practitioners. At the very least, the accord between intent and outcome needed to be more carefully assessed.

The consequences of this new awareness are now history. A dramatic shift took place in the seventies in the focus of all the social sciences, best summed up perhaps in the policy analysis movement. This move-ment has threatened to engulf all social research. It directs attention to what government does and to the consequences of these actions, the out-puts and outcomes respectively, in systems terms. Questions that politi-cal science had posed in the past as incidental to other interests now have become central to research. We seek to explain and understand what the authorities do, how satisfactorily they do it from the point of view of their own objectives, what kind of unexpected side effects occur, how effects of governmental action feed back on subsequent political action, and so on. And all these concerns relate specifically to issues that society considers urgent.

Here again, as with support, we have a body of raw facts or events— the suddenly recognized disparity between popular wants and needs and the results of governmental actions—looking around, as it were, for a way of ordering themselves. And even though systems thinking had not developed as a result of any prescience about the discontent of the sixties and seventies, the theoretical imperatives of this mode of analysis had already compelled detailed attention, conceptually, to the very kinds of matters that the newfound concern for government action suggested. Unlike previous modes of analysis, informal and implicit as they were, the systems approach has insisted upon conceiving of a political system as a dynamic ordering of political relationships. Simplistic as this formu-lation of the overall nature of a political system may seem, political science had seldom if ever thought of political life as a system that gets something done, that produces typical kinds of products. A political system is a means of converting particular combinations of support and

demands into what systems thinking has termed (policy) outputs. And the latter in turn have what have been described as outcomes (secondary, tertiary, etc. consequences) which may feed back on the next round of outputs as authorities and parts of the public seek to modify past actions so as to increase the likelihood of achieving preferred goals.

In short, policy analysis has been an explicit and central part of systems thinking. As a result it is not surprising that many of those interested in policy analysis have been able to find in my writings a ready-made conceptualization for helping to identify and explore the central problems likely to be encountered in the study of policy outputs. It has also offered the added dividend of helping to place this area of research in a meaningful theoretical context for the study of political systems.

To be sure, a rounded conception of politics would require that the current overcommitment to policy analysis yield to a more balanced perspective on the nature of the theoretical problems requiring attention. When that happens, we will have an opportunity as a discipline to examine outputs and outcomes—policies and their complex consequences—in relation to the other equally important aspects of political life as already suggested in systems analysis. In the meanwhile, however, it is not necessarily inappropriate for our interest in outputs to bulge out temporarily and overshadow other concerns, at least until we have worked through their significance. The history of all science suggests that knowledge does develop in such haphazard ways, at times responding to the needs of the period and at others to the internal requirements of theory and logic.

As I have said, I mention these two areas of contemporary interest—the input of support and policy outputs—only to show that the gap between basic or pure research in political science and the application of knowledge is not so wide as we may think. Although the justification of fundamental research is independent of its direct utility, the fact that systems analysis has had such immediate applicability has done the goals of basic research no harm. The appearance of both these books in paperback therefore serves to reaffirm that long-run concerns for the theoretical development of the discipline need in no way diminish the capacity to apply whatever knowledge we happen to have today in the service of the immediate needs of society.

David Easton

Preface

THIS is the third work in a long-range project on empirically oriented political theory. The first, *The Political System,* sought to present the case for general theory in political science. The second, *A Framework for Political Anaylsis,* laid out the major categories in terms of which it has seemed to me that such a theory might be developed. In the present book, the task will be to put that structure of concepts to work and, in doing so, to elaborate them further so that they can be more readily applied to empirical situations.

But this book remains a work confined to the theoretical level. Its primary objective is to elaborate a conceptual structure and suggest, where possible, some theoretical propositions. Its goal is not to undertake the validation of the statements or to demonstrate definitively the applications of such concepts. Testing is closely interwoven with theory construction; each feeds and grows on the other. But for sustained periods of time it is vital, in the development of a discipline, that particular attention be given to the separate needs and problems of each. In the specialization of labor that inevitably takes place, I have chosen to devote my efforts in this book to the elaboration of empirical theory. It is significant that although, until the last decade, empirical theory had received the blessings of but a small minority and the attention of only an isolated few, it is now increasingly becoming a special field of teaching, training, and research in political science.

This book picks up where *A Framework for Political Anaylsis* left off. Here I explore in detail what may be called the life processes of a political system, those kinds of functions through which it performs its characteristic work as a political system. I continue to view political life as a system surrounded by a variety of environments. Because it is an open system, it is constantly subject to possible stress from these environments. Yet, in spite of these dangers to political life, many systems are able to take the measures necessary to assure their own persistence through time. Our problem will be the deceptively simple one: How does it come about that any type of system can persist at all, even under the pressures of frequent or constant crises?

In seeking an answer to this central problem of empirical political theory, we are led to inquire into the exact nature of these stresses, to

examine concepts for describing precisely the way in which they are communicated to the political system, and to explore in considerable detail the various means through which a system may respond so as to cope with the stress. The very notion that political systems are capable of seizing fate by the forelock and shaping it to their own purposes will lead us to probe the means at their disposal for doing so.

In the outcome, we shall not have a theory in the full-blown sense of the term. We shall have a conceptual structure which, for various reasons to be elaborated later, is the most that we can expect in the area of general theory today. Some generalizations will inevitably emerge, but only as by-products.

Since we shall be concerned with general theory, we must constantly bear in mind what theory building at this level requires. The character of a theory will always hinge on how closely we decide to scrutinize a political system or on how far back we stand. If we are too remote, we can see only the broadest of outlines and this can be of little guidance to relevant research; and yet, if we remain too close, we will see details in such profusion and confusion that we will scarcely be better off. As a discipline, we have perhaps tended to be myopic in the past and to be inclined to peer too intently at our subject matter. I propose in this book to stand back, quite far compared to what our distance has been in the past, but not so far as to lose all sense of detail. At times, indeed, we may wish to take a very close look but only to illustrate a point here and there.

Those who have been accustomed to the microscopic research characteristic of political science will feel uneasy at so much that is being left out, and at such broad and rapid sweeps of the eyes across the empirical horizon. But unless I do this, I cannot fulfill my major objectives —to isolate the critical variables within the system, to identify some of their most significant relationships, and to present a coherent image of a theoretical approach.

In a way, theory building is like good photography. The details make better sense if we have first shot the broad scene so that we can see the proportions and better fit the bits and pieces of close-ups into a wider and more coherent frame. This is the very task of macroanalysis, the kind to be undertaken here.

In the preface to *A Framework for Political Analysis* I indicated the indebtedness I have incurred to others in the many years during which the present ideas were being worked over, and I would refer the reader to those comments. They apply here with equal force and justice.

But once again, I wish to express my appreciation for the financial assistance made available by the Social Science Research Committee

of the Division of the Social Sciences at the University of Chicago, and for the free time and funds put at my disposal by a Ford Research Professorship in Governmental Affairs (1960–1961). A year as a fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford, California (1957–1958) provided a unique systems-specific environment in which to think through many of the problems with which this book deals. In the past year, at Chicago, Vicky I. Meyer and Ruth Butzloff performed Herculean feats of labor in deciphering and transforming many rough drafts into finished, clearly typed manuscripts and in organizing the footnotes with painstaking attention to detail. I am also especially indebted to Mrs. Rosemary Smith for her meticulous skill in proofreading a long manuscript and in keeping an orderly hand on its final stages of preparation for publication.

The dedication of my book to my wife acknowledges in only token fashion her active participation in every phase of my intellectual, editorial, and administrative work.

David Easton

December, 1964

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