

MASS MEDIA AND POLITICAL SOCIALISATION : A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

ABSTRACT

Inherent in human association are competition and conflict. And this explains why the political process mediates and compromises conflicting interests of pressure groups in society. These conflicting interests constitute political inputs which are processed into policy outputs.

But the articulation of conflicting interests requires a degree of political socialization - the internalization of the various physical, cultural, technological, and aesthetic values of the political society by its members.

This political socialization as a societal process compels the raising of some pertinent questions : 1) Who learns ? 2) What is learned ? 3) From whom is it learned? 4) What are the circumstances of the learning ? and, 5) What effects does the learning process have ? The mass media are therefore a decisive agents of political socialization. Indeed, they determine who says what, to whom, through what medium, and, perhaps, with what effects.

RESUME

La compétition et le conflit sont à la base de l'existence des associations humaines. C'est pourquoi l'action politique entretient ou remet en question les intérêts conflictuels des groupes de pression dans la société. Ces intérêts conflictuels sont des données politiques qui déterminent l'action politique.

Toutefois l'articulation des intérêts conflictuels dépend du niveau de socialisation politique - de l'internisation des différen-

tes valeurs, physique, culturelle, technologique et esthétique de la société politique, par ses membres.

En tant que processus social, la socialisation politique fait naître quelques interrogations pertinentes : qui apprend quoi ? De qui ? Dans quelles circonstances et avec quels effets ? Par conséquent, les mass media sont d'importants facteurs de socialisation politique. Car ils déterminent qui dit quoi, à qui, par quel canal et peut-être avec quels effets.

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1. The Political Condition

The need for politics arises when some action of public consequence becomes necessary, and requiring a reasonable public choice despite the absence of an independent ground of judgement (1). Inherent in human association are competition and conflict. And it somehow becomes the challenge of the politician to surmount such conflict and appeal to the human sense of association and accommodation by mobilising people for common interests.

Politics has thus been conceived of as «the art of adjustment, the process of free-operating group pressures in an atmosphere of continuous discussion» (2). Instruction in politics seeks to socialise the individual from isolation into a vast socio-political complex, where society is seen as an interrelated whole. Private interests are reformulated in the setting of public goals. This does not necessarily imply denying the self. Rather it behoves placing self in the context of other and informing it with a sense of its dependence on the civic polity (3). The process, however, can be very complicated. Thus politics has been perceived of as the most hazardous of all professions. As Oliver observes,

... there is not another in which a man can hope to do so much to his people, neither is there any in which by a mere loss of

nerve he may do such widespread harm... nor is there another in which a positive and strict veracity is so difficult (4).

So perplexing is the substance of politics that some political leaders are acclaimed today and despised tomorrow. About the superficiality of certain charisma, Lewis writes :

One is always hearing about the popularity of these men [political leaders] - yet when they ,all, hardly anybody crosses the street... (5)

Similarly, some leaders of the past who are today esteemed and idolised as models of political leadership had been bitterly condemned in their days. An editorial writer in 1793 wrote of George Washington: «You are utterly incapable to steer the political ship into the harbour of safety» (6). In another instance, a leading paper portrayed Abraham Lincoln as -

an uneducated man, a vulgar village politician without any experience worth mentioning in the practical duties of statesmanship (7).

It is the politician who actually brings things to pass within the fabric of government. In effect, government falls into two general parts: the conceptual and the executorial. The conceptual phase of the political process oversees the origin, development and maturing of social will so that popular loyalties are marshalled to establish laws or conventions socially accepted or acquiesced in. The result is a reservoir of social will and power.

The executorial or administrative phase uses this reservoir to render governmental services or enforce duty, as the case may be (8). a complete act of government will thus consist in «the conversion of the desires or will of some individuals or groups into the behaviour of others or all in the society in which they dwell» (9).

Coordinating the conceptual and executorial phases of government can be quite intricate. Lewis' observation, along with the editorial commentaries on Washington and Lincoln evoked above, point to the ruggedness of the political trail.

Whatever the case, a repugnant image of the politician would lower the prestige of the administration and weaken the country's

leadership. The politician may not necessarily be an accomplished psephologist. Nonetheless, if he is to build a positive public image, he must be sufficiently informed about the interests and political behaviour of the electorate. The astute politician bathes in the sea of public opinion, and so knows how best to introduce ideas and policies into the political system. He «takes dough from the expert, but if it ever becomes wellbaked bread, it will be in the politician's oven» (10).

Modern state administration has become a vast entanglement of activities subject to bureaucratic competence or incompetence. And inventive social ideas would be useless unless combined with knowledge of the principles and practice of political navigation. Yet, political wit is not in itself a magic wand for realising ideas. It is one thing to invent a political policy and another thing to make the country believe in it. Crucial to political success, therefore, is the process of generating, gathering and sorting out ideas and interests, converting them into acceptable policies, and implementing such policies.

The political process mediates and compromises conflicting interests of pressure groups in society. It articulates and aggregates them, as far as possible, for common grounds of policy. In this connection, the conception of policies in any given political system must incorporate either demand or support inputs, or both, from the public (Fig. 1).

Interest or pressure groups react to policies differently. Some support. others demand adjustments. Generally, different groups would react to policies on the basis of how their specific interests relate to such

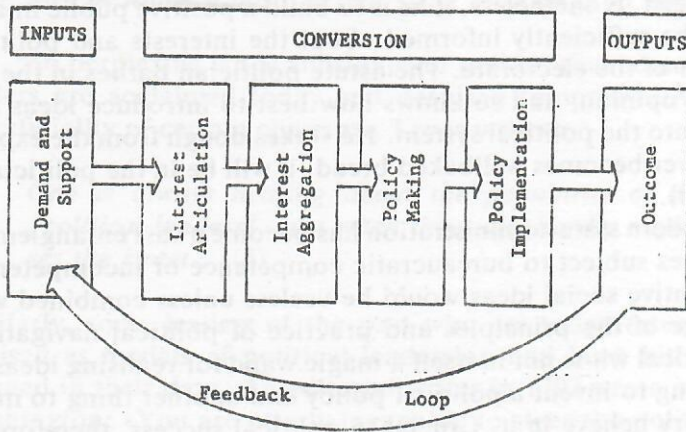


Fig. 1 : Policy Conception and Implementation in the Political System.

(Adapted from Almond and Powell, *Comparative Politics*, Canada, 1978, p. 285.

Policies. Responding to a given situation, they identify and publicise (i.e. articulate) their interests. Next, such diverse interests are aggregated. By implication, they are brought together and sorted out for a common platform. It is on the basis of these aggregated interests that a new policy is formulated, or an old one modified.

Paramount to the policy-formulation process is the Communication of news and information about current public opinion and policy alternatives. Thus the emergence of the mass media as a forum for political information and education.

2. Import of Political Socialisation

The political system includes not only government institutions such as legislatures, courts, administrative agencies, but all structures in their political aspects. These include even traditional

structures such as kinship ties, caste groups, anomic phenomena, parties, interest groups and the communication media (11). In other words, political structures* issue from the political system. The political system is a social system, and social systems are constituted of roles. A collection of such roles in turn constitutes a structure - legislature, electorate, pressure group, etc.

In the broad spectrum of the political system, therefore, the individual citizen must in one way or other identify with some role within some structure. And his role is performed within the context of the political culture in which he finds himself.

It thus becomes imperative that, whenever changes are introduced in the political culture (which guides political action), the citizen must be desocialised from the old, and socialised into the new culture. Unless this were done, he may ignorantly perform his role within a context estranged from current political principles and practices. The political system is principally occupied with maintenance and adaptation. So long as new roles are created or old ones changed as circumstances change, attitudes must be shaped, sustained, or changed in the political culture (12).

However, unlike administrative policies, those bearing on the functioning of a political system can last generations if well deliberated and popularly sanctioned. The American Constitution has run through two centuries with relatively little amendment. Frequent fluctuations in administrative policies are occasioned by recurrent changes in society. Conversely, system policies provide the bedrock of values and principles upon which such changes are judged and decided upon.

Potentially popular system modifications must therefore be made to permeate the entire fabric of the political culture. In conjunction with this concern, Weiner and Palombara warn that:

... a government may be so concerned with its own popularity that it fails to take measures to make the system itself legitimate. A charismatic leader may successfully retain popular support but fail to take steps to institutionalise a new political system (13).

* By structure is implied the activities that make up a system ; activities regular in behaviour, intention and expectation.

It is one thing to spawn ideas and quite another to keep them alive and potent. Here lies the challenge of the politician or the political elite in the articulation and aggregation of interests in the political system.

The live-wire in this process is communication. Political life is a form of social behaviour, and all social activity depends on communication (14). Hence the place of the mass media in the market place of political ideas and interests. In the process of political socialisation the media act more or less as brokers between the political elite and the masses.

This study is specifically concerned with the role of the mass media in political socialisation. Mention, though, may be made of other agents that intervene in the process. This, because the concept of political socialisation evokes the question of «who learns what, from whom, in what circumstances with what effect?» (15).

This controversy over which socialisation agents can achieve what effects arises from the contention that different methods of civic instruction have different capacities for effecting attitudinal change; to obtain an active response, political socialisation must transcend the cognitive, affective and evaluative components of the individual's attitude toward political objects (16).

All three components of political orientation are interrelated. To evaluate, one must be informed, or have knowledge. Motivation to seek such knowledge would generally come from some degree of interest or sense of affection.

Sociologists identify both formal and informal settings with the function of political socialisation. Formal organisation includes interest or pressure groups like trade unions, political parties and the press. Informal settings include the family, peer group, church, and school system (17).

As far as the affective component* of political orientation is concerned, the other agents of political socialisation appear to have a relative advantage over the press. This advantage is associated with the element of direct human contact.

Contenders of the media's affective limitations point to the impersonality of mass communication, which creates a psychological screen between communicator and communicant. Conversely,

* Generally, the affective component relates to a political system in terms of general feelings toward the system, e.g. rejection, acceptance, or sheer apathy.

the church, party or union can afford personal or physical human contact, with its inherent persuasive advantage.

The political party, for instance, may carry out political education by highlighting the problems of society and the party's own approach to solutions. This could be done through systematically organised campaign rallies. In the aggregation of interests, it may bring together the political interests and views of a large number of people, and come up with a common platform on issues. It may also, through physical human contact, articulate aggregated interests during education campaigns.

Despite this relative advantage, the church, parties and pressure groups often resort to use of the mass media to acquire and disseminate information. On the other hand, the mass media may be limited, but not entirely handicapped, affectively. In fact, they combine all three components of cognition, affection and evaluation most effectively. Mass media effects cannot categorically be limited to cognitive information. As Gerbner argues,

the principal "effects" of mass communications are thus to be found in the fundamental assumptions, definitions, and premises they contain and cultivate, and not necessarily in agreements or disagreements with their overt suggestions or acting upon their specific propositions at any one time (18).

The effects of the mass media in increasing citizen awareness of the issues, leaders, and policy alternatives available in society is, indeed, well recognised. Hence national leaders and politicians have made many attempts to mobilise regime support and introduce a sense of identification with national symbols through mass media control (19).

3. Media in Policy Formulation and Implementation

Policy formulation entails more or less a bargain between the management constraints of state and the conflicting interests of pressure groups in society. Actually, the development of specialised interest groups increases the ability of decision makers to learn of the demands of society. Such information can then be used «to strike various bargains for the support of the groups needed to sustain the regime and help its leaders seek their goals (20).

It is the mass media that possess the greatest relative advantage in this aspect - that of rapid collection and diffusion of information. It is largely for this reason that they have come to have an important influence on politics. They regularly present politically crucial information to political elites, decision makers and citizens alike. In the same vein, Graber observes that :

By putting stories into perspective and interpreting them, media personnel assign meaning to the information and indicate the values by which it ought to be judged... facts do not speak for themselves (21).

In indicating or assigning meaning to information or news, the media provide the raw material needed by elite and mass alike, for thinking about the political world and planning political action. The communication process, of which the media have a prominent bearing, enlightens the public on what rational latitudes exist for sizing up conflicting interest vis-à-vis policy alternatives.

The public finds in the media a common fund of knowledge and information, from which it can sensibly debate collective action. In this regard Pye remarks:

The communications process provides a basis for limiting and making explicit the legitimate scope of political causality so that leaders and citizens can all be compelled to accept the same sense of the plausible (22).

Leaders and citizens are thus linked, especially in a democratic system, by reciprocal expectation. The governed seek to develop and express opinions which identify and evaluate their interests. The governors in turn expect the expression of *vox populi* on current issues of public policy.

However, reconciling conflicting interests in society into common policies can be very perplexing. Regional, tribal or ethnic sentiments very often cloud the view to rational evaluation of policy alternatives. As Almond and Powell write, this unfortunate phenomenon is quite commonplace in the developing countries :

A common complaint about political institutions is that personalistic aggregations by many local patrons and influentials makes unified policy making and policy implementation diffi-

cult (24).

In the face of an extraordinarily multiple articulation of tribal and ethnic interests the mass media may provide the instrument for collective indoctrination to replace confusion with a common view. Or, they can become vehicles for community building through which people with different points of view can learn to associate with each other (25). The logic behind this argument derives from the fact that the media feature shades of opinion and news stories and events from all over the country. Individual interest groups thus get exposed to realistic divergencies with which their own views must contend.

The greatest significance of the media in policy formulation lies in their capacity to employ informed experts and analyse policy alternatives. Many of the big issues of the nation often are quite remote from the life of the citizen. They may be tied to remote and complex policy remedies beyond the ready evaluation of the average citizen. In such circumstances, choices made by the national media as to the salience of issues and the credibility of alternatives tend to shape the perceptions of citizens (26). Of course, such media intervention may duly or unduly influence the citizen's judgement. The national media may even encourage or discourage involvement in the policy process itself (27). Under totalitarian or quasi-totalitarian political systems, however, the media usually find little latitude for desuading public participation in policy processes they judge questionable.

On the other hand, the public media in such systems can be very effective in rallying mass participation in well-meaning policies. After all, it has been argued that «where a government is genuinely committed to the development of all the people, media take-over by the government is an act of liberation and emancipation» (28). It all depends on the media being used for the progress or the oppression of the popular masses.

In both pluralistic and non-pluralistic media systems, therefore, the mass media can be instrumental in interest aggregation when they interpret and diffuse conflicting information. Crisis situations to which politicians must act are defined, as the media require authoritative and informed comment on issues they emphasize as important (29).

The arguments reviewed above all point to the fact that the mass media feature in both the informative and educative compo-

nents of political socialisation. From the informative perspective, news stories and features carry information about the latest developments within a political system. Such information is rapidly disseminated across the length and breadth of society. As has already been noted, the mass media are capable of publicising innovations far and wide, transmitting all relevant information with relatively minimum distortion.

However, reporting news about changes in the political system is only a preliminary aspect of media intervention in political socialisation. News stories and features only present facts. But if the citizen is going to adjust his political life style to innovations reported in the news story, he must have the facts "digested". He must understand the details and implications and, above all, how his role in the system is specifically affected. Here then lies the role of editorials, commentaries and analyses in the media.

Admittedly, editorials and commentaries may appraise and interpret political developments from different standpoints, depending on the ideological loyalties of the media organ. This is particularly the case in pluralistic media systems. However, it is by sifting through the different shades of opinion that the citizen within that culture acquires an understanding of the political process.

In a non-pluralistic system, the public media's editorials and commentaries enjoy relative lee-way to elaborate on changes introduced in the political system. Editorials reflect the standpoint of a news organ. It therefore follows that the editorial of a public news organ would highlight the position of government on a given issue. And that its commentaries would throw light on the civic implications of policies introduced by government.

Analyses, however, are about the most educative of the media's editorial genres. This is because, by their very nature, they point up the whys and the wherefores of issues. In the specific case of political reforms, an analysis would reach beyond enumerating the specific elements of change, to explaining their meaning and scope, peace meal. That way, the citizen acquires an insight into the notion of citizenship. He would thus evolve from the passive submission of a political robot, into the active and sane participation of an enlightened citizen.

In sum, therefore, it can justifiably be contended that news stories of the mass media provide information on which the public

may base civic and political judgement. Editorials, commentaries and analyses provide education on the values and principles that should guide the performance of civic duty.

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