

Systems model; critique assignment

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**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Critique the relevance of the systems model to the study of politics Models, theories and concepts as approaches for analysing policy and decision making have been developed by political and social scientists to guide the study of public policy, to facilitate communication and to suggest possible explanations for policy actions. This essay is a critique of the relevance of the systems model to the study of politics. A model is conceptually defined as a theoretical representation of empirical data that aims to advance understanding through highlighting of significant relationships and interactions.

According to Heywood (2007) one of the most influential models in political analysis is the Political system model developed by David Easton (1979, 1981) which aims to explain the entire political process including the functions of the major political actors through what is called systems analysis. A system is an organised and complex whole, a set of interrelated and interdependent parts that form a collective entity. Roskin, Cord, Medeiros & Jones (1997) concur that in the political systems model the politics of a given country worked the same way as a biological system.

Here they were trying to emphasise the interrelationships and interdependence likening it to the biological human body; how the various organs needed or related to each other and likening this to the political system. Systems theory is therefore the theory that treats the political system as a self regulating mechanism responding to inputs (demands and supports) by issuing authoritative decisions or outputs (policies). David Easton's model illustrated the existence of a linkage between inputs and outputs in a political system(Heywood, 2007).

Inputs consist of demands and support from the general public and demands in a political system range from pressure for the need of a higher standard of living, improved employment opportunities, greater protection to minorities, improved social benefits among many. Support on the other hand includes ways in which the public responds to the political system that is by paying taxes, offering compliance to the state through participation in public life and other societal issues. Heywood (ibid) further asserts that outputs on the other and are in the form of laws promulgated by government, consisting of decisions and actions of government that is the passing of laws, the imposition of taxes and most importantly allocation of public funds. The outputs generate feedback which consist of further demands and support from the general public. Further Easton referred to what he called gatekeepers being political parties, church organisations, pressure groups which gatekeepers manage the perception of the people and convey their inputs in the form of demands and supports. Outputs from government go back to the people and the cycle goes on and on.

He projected that a political system tends to operate at equilibrium as its survival depends on outputs being brought into line with inputs. However, according to Anderson (1997) the usefulness of the systems theory in studying public policy is limited by its highly general and abstract nature. Older studies have devoted little attention to the nature and definition of public problems. It is now conventional wisdom that policy study that does not consider the characteristics and dimensions of the problems that stimulate government action is less than complete.

In Easton's model there is no clarity on the inputs which are the problems of the public. It gives a general picture of society. The importance lies in knowing both why some problems are acted on and others are neglected and why a problem is defined in one way rather than another. It is also important to know the nature of the problem whether it is foreign or domestic, a new item or an outgrowth of an existing policy to determine the ensuing policy making process, issues that the systems model is silent on.

According to Jackson & Jackson (2003) the basic argument of systems analysis is that governments are the centre of political systems which involves three stages mainly the effects of the environment on a political system by making multiple demands, as well as providing fundamental support. A demand can be defined as a condition or situation that produces needs or dissatisfaction among people for which relief or redress is sought.

For example problems such as air pollution, unwholesome food, abortion, urban congestion, crowded prisons and global warming are conditions that may become problems if they produce sufficient anxiety or dissatisfaction to cause people to seek a remedy. For this to happen people must have some criterion or standard by which the troubling condition is judged to be both unreasonable or unacceptable and appropriate for government to handle Anderson (1997). Conditions do not become public problems unless they are defined as such, articulated by someone or defined as such.

The systems model therefore does not explore these highlighted problems. According to Jackson & Jackson (ibid) the systems analysis is criticised often arguing that the model on which it is based does not help discern which part

of a political system are essential or influential. It is further argued that it is impossible to predict how or even whether a change in one part of the system will affect another part. Furthermore political systems are not as closely related as the model implies. Political systems are not as static as the model implies

Another criticism of the systems theory is that it does not acknowledge the changes that occur with time. According to Roskin (et al) systems change over time with the rise of new powers, new technologies and new alliances. It does not even recognise the existence of bigger entities with many components for example countries or groups of countries that interact with each other forming international systems. To some the fall of the Soviet empire in the 1990's marked the end of the cold war and the bipolar system.

But some argue that the bipolar system did not end with the collapse of the Soviet Union, but rather a multi polar economics race emerged. As Moscow gave up the East European nations and no longer posed any invasion threat to Western Europe which moved closer to unity in the European Union (EU). All barriers among the fifteen members disappeared, producing a single economy if not a single political entity. The United States on the other hand had some economic problems, massive trade deficits following massive budget deficits making it the biggest debtor.

It could no longer call the tune and get alliance from allies in Europe and Asia. Countries of the Eastern bloc consolidated their political system significantly. The systems model is limited in this sense in that its diagrammatic representation is only limited to small entities. According to

Anderson (ibid) a condition to be turned into a problem, must be seen as an appropriate topic for governmental action and further, as something for which there is a possible governmental remedy or solution.

The systems model does not articulate the inputs fed into gate keepers, neither does it clarify the difference between conditions and problems. Those who oppose government action to ban smoking in public places may argue that tobacco smoke is not harmful, or that smoke is a matter of individual choice and should not be regulated. Professor Wildavsky contends that officials are unlikely to deal with a problem unless it is coupled with a solution. He thus, states that ‘ a problem is a problem only if something can be done about it’,(Anderson, ibid). Thus in Easton’s model there is no emphasis on the nature of the inputs.

Power distribution in the systems model is not adequately explored in the graphical representation. In today’s world for example the American system, political power is fragmented and dispersed by constitutional prescription and political practice. Many points of official decision making exist and a multitude of officials share in the exercise of political power and the formulation of public policy. Structural functionalism focuses on the different levels of a system and their reciprocal influences and also the possibility of making generalisations about them.

It is premised on what structures perform what functions in any given system and under what conditions. Key proponent Almond (1960) critically examined Easton’s model and proceeded to look for the functions that could be included among the inputs and outputs of a political system and identified

six functions. Chief among these functions is interest articulation, interest aggregation, rule application and adjudication and communication. Political systems consist of units or structures that perform certain or particular functions.

The detailed variables with which the model is concerned are structural that is pressure groups, political parties, the legislature among many. Political systems are compared on the basis of the functions that are performed by their units. However, according to Jackson & Jackson (ibid), the structural functional approach does not accommodate itself well to the state as a dynamic entity. The mechanical role of performing functions is assigned to the state. It ignores the human element that those who perform functions of the state may have their own interests.

Some critics even argue that structural functional approach places too much emphasis on technology and rational procedures and obscures the relationship between structures and functions. Almond seems to contend that all systems must evolve in the same manner and direction as did the Anglo American Democracies if they wish to develop to higher political stages. David Easton's model of a political system is the basis of most contemporary political systems. But however, it is only ideal as there are constant changes that occur in the society we live in, therefore an equilibrium can never be achieved.

It forms a basis of analysis upon which scientific generalisations can be made. REFERENCE Anderson, J. E. Public policy making; An introduction (3rd edition). Houghton Mifflin Company: Boston Heywood, A. (2007). Politics (3rd

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