

APPLIED SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

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Political Psychology

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The scope of political psychology

Imagine a typical meeting between a nonmilitant and a militant during a period of great public ferment, like the 'events' of 1968. When the nonmilitant says 'I'm not interested in politics', the militant invariably replies, 'You can't say that. Every choice you make, all your behaviour, even the most private, is political because it reflects the current political and ideological system and, along with the choices and behaviour of everyone else, influences the form it takes.' This kind of answer already shows how difficult it is to define the scope of politics and, more specifically, say where the political sphere ends and the social sphere begins. The difficulty is illustrated by the fact that the limits of the political sphere change during different historical periods (and under different political regimes). In the Ancient World, for example, the scope of politics was extremely broad because it embraced everything to do with the *polis*, and so all social relationships within a given community. Politics is usually less all-embracing in the modern world, although regimes do differ appreciably. There are those in which politics governs all aspects of behaviour, including what seem extremely private matters like deciding to marry or have children. In others, perhaps ideal ones like the minimal state advocated by liberals, politics is confined to the administration of the state and the exercise of power in relation to just a few specific functions.

Irrespective of how the limits of the political sphere are determined, which is the proper concern of other disciplines, we could define political psychology in operational terms as the discipline that studies the mental functioning and actions of political 'actors', that is, of any subject seen as a (potential or actual) citizen, leader or member of a group or movement whose aims

are public and collective. The scope of politics depends on how these roles are interpreted in different historical periods and under different political regimes.

Most political scientists are also extremely interested in analysing politics in terms of the 'actors' who participate in it. Until the end of the last century, politics was dominated by a European and continental perspective in which ideologies and institutions were the major focuses of study. Since then, the emphasis has shifted to the more empirical Anglo-Saxon concept that politics is a direct expression of the people or forces involved in it, whether leaders or public opinion. This shift of interest towards the 'actors' of politics has led some political scientists to borrow theories and methods from psychology in their studies; others have developed implicit political psychologies of their own.

However, few university syllabuses today are designed to train specialists in political psychology, with the notable exception of American universities which have produced a large proportion of our political psychology studies to date. Inevitably, then, American culture and politics have had an important influence on the content and methods of political psychology. As regards content, we might reflect on the appropriateness or otherwise of generalizing from data gathered in one specific political system to studies of other different systems; as regards methods, the longstanding emphasis on the intra-individual dimension is now being challenged and modified by a growing interest in the inter-individual and group dimensions.

Historical stages

Let us now survey briefly the major stages in the development of political psychology studies (see Amerio, 1991; McGuire, 1993).

Psychology and personality

In the 1940s and 1950s, most studies focused on the role of personality factors in the exercise of political power, with special emphasis on political leaders. Political behaviour was seen as the expression of stable personality traits and needs, whose origins were traced back to early childhood development and explained in predominantly psychoanalytical terms. One example is the work of Lasswell (1948), who located the origins of politicians' commitment to public affairs in their need for external reassurance to dispel unresolved ego anxieties and remedy low self-esteem. The method was both qualitative and quantitative (see McGuire, 1993). In qualitative terms, the key consideration is historical reconstruction, or psychohistory, based on detailed biographies of individual politicians starting from early childhood. This approach is still used by researchers. One example is Barber's study (1985) of American presidents, which concludes that presidents with low self-esteem were incapable of changing their policies during their terms of office, even when they were

shown to be misguided, as with President Johnson's commitment to American intervention in Vietnam. Other more quantitative studies have surveyed the political views of ordinary people using scales and questionnaires administered to broad samples of subjects. One example, which we shall return to later, is Adorno's study of the authoritarian personality (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950).

Attitudes and voting behaviour

The 1960s and 1970s saw an explosion in studies of public opinion and voting patterns. Large-scale surveys showed how little information subjects actually make use of when making political choices, and concluded that people behave in largely irrational ways. The prevalent explanation at the time (see Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960) attributed this to family influence and, more generally, to the process of socialization. As well as explaining political attitudes in developmental terms, some studies also employed theories dominant at the time, like functionalism, which relates attitudes to motivation, and cognitive style, which assumes that a subject's fundamental need is to restore balance when faced with contradictory attitudes.

Political cognition and information processing

From the 1970s through to the late 1980s, researchers shifted their attention away from attitudes and behaviour as such to the information-processing mechanisms that underlie them, and from explanations based on motivation to explanations based on the cognitive capabilities of subjects. Using results obtained from social cognition studies, they developed a line of research based on political cognition (see Lau & Sears, 1986) in which the assumption was not, as before, that political behaviour is largely irrational, nor even (as economic theories would suggest) that it is completely rational, but that its rationality is conditioned by the limited information-processing capability of individual subjects.

Current trends

Although assessing the present is always a difficult task, we can now say with reasonable certainty what the latest research trends are, or at least which trends may hopefully carry political psychology beyond the impasses of current cognitivist approaches. One important trend is that political psychology is now more genuinely social than political cognition would strictly allow it to be. The reasons for this derive from four considerations that apply to social knowledge in general, and even more so to political knowledge (see Amerio, 1991; Catellani & Quadrio, 1991).

(a) Political knowledge is social in origin. It is created and reinforced through interaction and, more than in other knowledge domains, is acquired not directly but through intermediary sources strongly influenced by social and cultural context like newspapers, television, opinion leaders and politicians themselves.

(b) Studies of social and political cognition have treated the social and political dimensions as *objects of perception*, not as dimensions that influence the *person who perceives*, with the result that intrapersonal processes have attracted more attention than interpersonal and group processes. The relationships cognizers have with others, and the fact that they belong to one group rather than another, are factors that have an important influence on cognitive processes, and are themselves important topics for study in political psychology.

(c) The study of political psychology cannot be confined to the micro dimension; it must also be extended to the macro dimension that embraces relationships between individual mental functioning and social and political reality. Only in this way will it be possible to study issues that are crucial to the discipline, like migration (see Chapter 15 of this volume), social change, the distribution of power, relations between the public and private spheres, etc.

(d) The study of basic cognitive processes is certainly essential, but studying their articulation in a variety of social and political contexts could be useful too. Among other things, this will draw attention to the complex relationships between the contents and the processes of knowledge.

This brief summary of major issues in political psychology will first of all be concerned with the basic cognitive processes that govern the acquisition of political knowledge and decision making, although we shall also take full account, where studies have already raised the issue, of how these processes interact with the social dimension and specific features of political content.

We shall then consider attitudes and political beliefs and, more specifically, how they are structured around ideological principles and more inclusive values. Finally, we shall look at political participation, whose prerequisites include knowledge and attitudes, but whose actualization is influenced by the context the subject lives in.

Political knowledge

Political cognition research has dominated political psychology studies in recent years. This section will deal mainly with the results obtained using this approach. The basic assumptions are similar to those of social cognition: man is seen as a subject who actively processes information, has limited cognitive capacities and so necessarily adopts strategies of simplification that enable him to perform the cognitive task in hand, although this means that not all the available information can be processed. Taking for granted that the processing system itself is limited, the amount of information processed and the types of strategy used are influenced by factors like personality and motivation, the goals subjects set themselves and other factors generated by the context in which the cognitive process is activated. One of the most important of these is degree of accountability (Tetlock, 1983), that is, the perceived need (induced by social context) to account for reasoning and judgements based on it. Thus, a subject involved in a bar-room discussion of how to deal with drug pushers

in public parks will probably use simpler strategies than someone who has to discuss the same issues in a neighbourhood committee meeting.

A growing number of studies in this specific context have drawn attention to aspects of political cognition that are different from those of cognition in other contexts, most notably the role of the media as information filters and the consequences of this in terms of information processing. Although we cannot look at them in detail here, we should note in passing that a substantial number of studies have been made, mainly in the United States, of the way information is presented (selected, manipulated, etc.) by television and the press, and how this affects human information processing. The order in which events are narrated, the presentation of political issues in an abstract rather than a concrete way and the source through which information is supplied are only some of the factors that make certain pieces of information seem more important than others, and guide the information acquisition process of subjects.

Which information is processed in a political context? Obviously, a large portion consists of everything that falls within the scope of politics in the strict sense, issues like economic reform, privatization, social welfare, armaments, defence and so on that concern the life of a community and determine the political stances of the parties involved. However, another significant portion consists of information about people. In a democratic system, political activity depends on delegation and so also on choosing people we think will represent us effectively.

In a given situation, the subject's attention may focus more on issues or on people, depending on the subject's aim. A programme of economic reform proposed by a politician may be perceived and processed in one way if the aim is to form an opinion on the matter, and in another if the aim is to decide whether to vote for that politician in the next election. In the former case, I might code the politician's arguments in terms of their theoretical economic plausibility; in the latter, I might code them as indications of the politician's greater or lesser competence and powers of persuasion. Although one might think that information about people is more important than information about issues in the run-up to elections (see Iyengar & Ottati, 1994), the question of whether voting is based on people or issues is still an open one (see pp. 305–307) and probably depends on the particular system and political situation.

Although increasing attention is now being paid to the special features of the political sphere, many of the results obtained so far from political cognition studies are essentially replications of results obtained from social cognition studies with different content. For this reason, a summary of what happens during information processing is given in Figure 11.1, while the text examines only a few specific points, mainly those concerning the way in which knowledge of politicians and of political issues is organized and represented in the subject's mind (for a fuller discussion of political cognition results see Iyengar & Ottati, 1994). Obviously there are close links between knowledge of politicians and of political issues: we think of people in terms of the ideas they advocate, and vice versa. Generally speaking, researchers have tended to deal with the two areas separately, so we shall do the same here.

1. Coding

In this stage new information is collated with concepts which are already present in subject's mind. The degree of accessibility of these concepts is determined by a range of factors, such as:

- perceiver's aim
- frequency of previous use of concept
- recency of previous use of concept

2. Organization and representation

In this stage new and existing information is integrated. To describe how this happens, models based on semantic networks are frequently used. These networks consist of: (a) nodes, which correspond to concepts; (b) links, which correspond to the relationships between concepts.

3. Retrieval

In this stage information is retrieved from memory. Which information is retrieved depends on:

- the way information was coded
- the way information was transformed into representation
- the aim pursued at the moment of recall
- retrieval cues

Figure 11.1 Stages in human information processing: notions developed by social cognition studies and shared by political cognition studies

Perception of politicians

The results of studies of political cognition can be summarized using the various stages in human information processing.

Coding

In the coding phase new information is collated with known concepts and given meaning. The same piece of information about a politician may be relevant to more than one concept, so different people will code it in different ways. For example, when a head of government says, 'I swear on the life of my children that I have never offered kick-backs to financiers', we may interpret this statement either as a passionate denial of any involvement in corruption, or as the (inappropriate) involvement of a politician's private life in public affairs.

One of the factors which determine the accessibility of one or the other of the concepts to the subject's mind is the aim being pursued: when interpreting the head of government's statement, most people's aim would be to form an accurate picture of the politician, although a minority might have other aims and code the message differently as a result. For example, a psycho-biographer (or psychoanalyst) might interpret the politician's statement as an expression of latent conflict between his role as a leader and his role as a father.

The other factors that influence accessibility – how frequently and recently the concept has been used – are related to the subject's existing knowledge

base. Someone who has recently seen a TV programme about the misconduct of a politician who is a close friend of the head of government in our example will probably interpret the message differently to someone who has recently learned of judicial errors that have led to the public and private disgrace of unjustly accused politicians. The interpretation of the message may be influenced not only by a subject's existing knowledge of the matter in hand, but also by his or her knowledge of the person involved. This knowledge may be schematic – the person may be seen not as an individual but stereotypically with all the typical features of the category (whether a political party or a social class) he or she belongs to (see Lodge & Hamill, 1986) – or piecemeal – the person's individual physical features or character traits may remind the subject of another similar person (see Fiske and Pavelchak, 1986), even if the other person belongs to a different category. Which of the two perceptions will prevail in various circumstances is unclear, but in both cases, existing knowledge (schematic or piecemeal) will influence the accessibility of concepts when the message is being perceived, and therefore its encoding.

So far, we have seen that information is coded in relation to concepts that are accessible to the mind: basically, the process seems to involve integrating new information with existing information. However, when it proves difficult to assimilate new information to available concepts – indeed, when the opposite applies, and the new information *challenges* available concepts – a different process may be activated, based on contrast rather than assimilation. When this happens, existing knowledge is used not to assimilate new information but to highlight the difference between the two classes of knowledge (old and new). Thus, the liberal proposal that investment funds above a certain amount should be taxed may be coded as even more liberal if it comes from a conservative party.

When this contrast-based process is not activated, it seems likely that content which cannot be related to easily accessible concepts is simply not coded: as we have seen, information is processed selectively as an adaptive response to the limitations of human reasoning.

Organization and representation

We have said that information coding is profoundly influenced by existing knowledge. Now we must see how new information is integrated with existing knowledge both in the short-term memory and in the complex storage systems of the long-term memory. To describe the organization of knowledge and its representation in the long-term memory, most cognitivists use a semantic network model (see Collins & Loftus, 1975).

McGraw, Pinney and Neumann (1991) have tested three different semantic network models for the representation of political actors (Figure 11.2), each based on a different dimension (attribute type, partisanship, evaluation type). Using the results of a pre-test, McGraw et al. drew up a list of 16 statements about an imaginary political candidate, each characterized by one ideological and one evaluative trait that were both clearly evident, uncorrelated, and shared by the pre-test subjects. For example, a statement like 'restoring capital

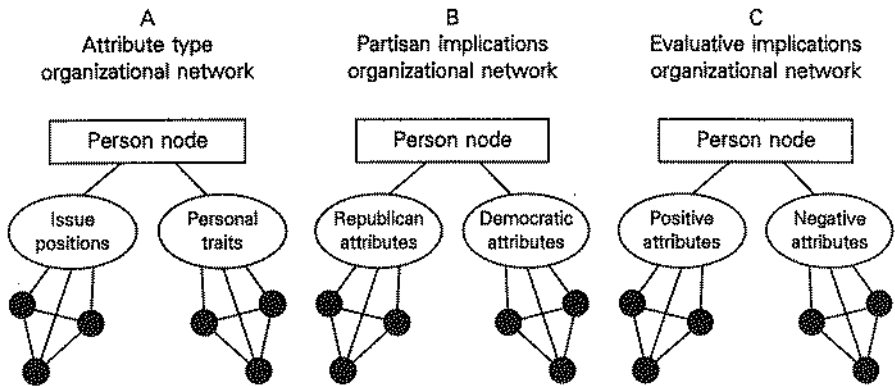


Figure 11.2 Comparison of three alternative organizational strategies for the representation of political actors (McGraw, Pinney, & Neumann, 1991)

punishment in New York State' was evaluated by pre-test subjects as a typical Republican attitude, and the subjects themselves judged it positively, irrespective of their own ideological stances (Republican, Democrat, nonpartisan). The list of 16 statements was completely balanced in terms of attribute type (eight issue attitudes, eight personal traits), partisan implications (eight Republican, eight Democrat) and evaluative implication (eight positive, eight negative).

Sample students were given the statements one after the other, having being told that the aim of the study was to see how people form impressions about political candidates. After a distracting task, the subjects were given without warning a recall task to which their responses had to be as accurate as possible. After analysing the results, McGraw et al. concluded that the first of their models best reflected how information about politicians is organized. Like the other models, this one has a hierarchical structure in which a super-ordered node representing the candidate is linked vertically to two information clusters, one containing information about the candidate's personality traits, the other information about his or her stances in relation to political issues. These clusters may in turn be organized hierarchically, in the sense that, for example, information about personality traits may be organized under a few more inclusive dimensions like leadership/competence on the one hand, and integrity/empathy on the other (Kinder, 1986).

Retrieval

Obviously, the fact that information is coded on the basis of existing knowledge and converted into representations determines how information is subsequently retrieved. In retrieval, as in coding, the aim of the person who is processing the information is important. If, as is usually the case in the political sphere, the aim is to form a judgement about a person (as voting day draws near, for example), subjects will first scan their short-term memory and then turn to long-term memory if they fail to find the information they need

to form an opinion. Retrieval cues are also important: assuming that the network model we looked at earlier is valid, the presence of one or another cue will activate one mental chain rather than another and therefore determine which information is retrieved.

Perception of political issues

As with the perception of people, we can describe knowledge of political issues using the various stages in human information processing.

Coding

If the essential elements we need to define a person are his or her traits and/or belonging to a certain social group or class, the elements that help us to understand a political issue, event or proposal are its temporal and/or causal antecedents and consequents. Thus, coding a political event entails the construction of a mental scenario that includes not just the event itself, but also an assessment of what might have caused it and what might result from it. In the case of a political proposal, attention would focus mainly on its possible consequences.

The sheer complexity of reality means that any event will have many possible antecedents and consequents, even before we distinguish between those that operate in the short term and others that operate in the long term. Whether one rather than another antecedent or consequent is accessible to the subject's mind depends, as always, on the subject's existing knowledge of the issue, but here especially we have to remember that this knowledge is almost never acquired through direct experience, but through other intermediate sources like history books and newspapers which will already have selected some antecedents and consequents rather than others. Thus, if there is some prospect of a left-wing government coming to power, the scenario and its possible consequents will probably be based on the outcome of a similar situation in other countries, as presented in the sources of information at our disposal.

Organization and representation

We can make a useful distinction between intra-issue and inter-issue organization (Iyengar & Ottati, 1994). The former describes how the event is represented in the subject's mind, together with antecedents/consequents and corresponding evaluations; the second describes how different issues are organized in the subject's mind around a number of super-ordered unifying principles.

Once again, the network models used to describe politicians, which we looked at earlier, are employed here to describe inter-issue organization. One example is Judd and Krosnick's model (1989), in which nodes representing both individual political actors or parties and individual political issues are linked to other nodes representing abstract values or ideological principles.

Each node has a certain strength (level of accessibility or activation) and evaluative connotation (negative or positive) and the links between them (confirmation, inclusion, exclusion, etc.) also have varying degrees of strength.

Judd and Krosnick used this model in a study of the factors that influence the coherence of subjects' attitudes to political issues, and so the extent to which these issues are mentally organized around certain core values. A sample of adults was interviewed to measure their attitudes to political issues, candidates and parties, the importance they attributed to those political issues, and political competence. The results showed that both the importance they attributed to political issues, and their political competence, influenced the coherence of their attitudes, and so also the extent to which issues are mentally organized around core values. Political competence seems to generate more numerous relationships between the various nodes, and the importance attributed to an issue seems to increase the likelihood that the corresponding node will be activated once other linked nodes have already been activated.

The notion that specific policies are organized around a number of core values or abstract principles like freedom or equality is a feature not only of Judd and Krosnick's model, but also of other models that attempt to describe how attitudes to and beliefs about issues are structured. There is broad agreement on this point, but the same cannot be said of attempts to explain exactly what these organizing principles are (liberal/conservative ideological dimension, abstract values like liberty or equality, etc.), and if they operate in the same way for all issues. On the other hand, these attempts transcend the aims of political cognition studies in the strict sense, in that they imply not so much the processes of political cognition as their articulation in terms of culturally and socially mediated content. We shall return to this problem later when we look at attitudes and political beliefs.

Retrieval

As with the retrieval of any other kind of mental content, what is retrieved about political issues obviously depends on how information is organized in memory, and the subject's aim when retrieval takes place. Thus, if mental coding and organization are based on temporal/causal sequences of events, retrieval may include references to the possible antecedents and consequents of an event, as well as to the event itself. Similarly, a subject may retrieve some of the core values the issue relates to, rather than the detail of the issue itself.

Expertise

Political cognition studies have shown that the kind of information processing we have looked at so far varies according to the political expertise of subjects. The study of expertise in various domains of knowledge assumes that cognitive processes are linked to knowledge contents and the way they are organized. This means that we have to explore these various domains of

knowledge if we want to understand how the minds of individuals actually work.

Like the other social sciences, politics is an 'ill-defined' domain; its contents cannot easily be reduced to rules and algorithms, and it straddles not one but several disciplines which it usually assimilates from a variety of sources. So political expertise is difficult to define, and further difficulties arise from the fact that studies have tended to concentrate on different aspects of expertise, which in turn have been operationalized in different ways. Despite this, we can still identify the most important factors in political expertise (see Fiske, Lau, & Smith, 1990).

Political knowledge

Up to now, many indicators have been used to measure political knowledge, usually general notions of civics, political events and figures and current affairs. However, many of these indicators are based on static concepts and statements; few are concerned with procedural knowledge or problem-solving ability. Essential political knowledge apart, another four factors have been identified that contribute to political expertise, in the sense that they operate simultaneously as both causes and consequences of it.

Media use

Political knowledge may be acquired through systematic study of disciplines like political science, but it can certainly also be got from nonsystematic sources embedded in the specific historical and cultural environment subjects live in, and from subjects' interests and choices. The media are one such source, and magazines and newspapers, which stimulate political interest more effectively than television, appear to be the most important.

Political self-concept

This term describes the importance of a subject's political interest and ideological stance in determining the concept of self. Few studies have dealt with the concept, although the factor does seem to play an important role.

Political interest

This factor is generally measured using self-report instruments, and studies agree on its importance in measuring political expertise.

Political activity

Although several studies have found a link between this factor and political expertise, opinion is divided over whether political activity is a factor in itself, that is once other factors have been excluded. For example, Hamill, Lodge and Blake (1985) and Fiske, Lau and Smith (1990) found no correlation between political activity and political knowledge.

The issue has been further explored in a study by Catellani (1995) of a sample of young subjects involved in political activity to varying degrees. A

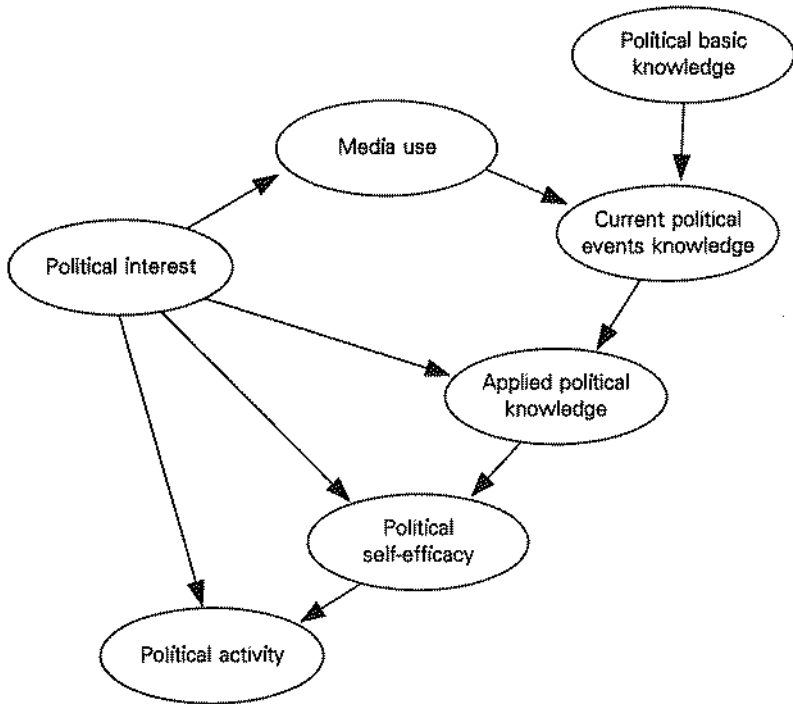


Figure 11.3 Structural equation model of the relationships between political knowledge and political participation (Catellani, 1995)

questionnaire provided data about three types of political knowledge – basic (e.g. functions of governmental institutions), current affairs (e.g. names of party leaders and government figures) and problem-related, or applied. In the case of the third type of knowledge, subjects were presented with a variety of political problems (e.g. welfare state, defence budget, privatization of public services) and were asked to say what they would do to solve these problems, and which people or government figures could bring influence to bear in solving the problem. Degree of applied knowledge was measured using an index that integrated the quantity and quality of the responses given.

The aim was to see how each of these knowledge types is linked not only to the others, but also to factors like political interest and political activity. Political interest was measured using three indicators: declared interest, political discussion and emotional involvement. Political activity was measured using a list of support activities (e.g. 'I distributed leaflets'), organizational activities (e.g. 'I helped organize some demonstrations') and official activities (e.g. 'I had an official position within the party').

Structural equation models applied to the various factors revealed that basic political knowledge and media use are linked through current-affairs knowledge to applied knowledge (Figure 11.3). The study also revealed a strong link between political interest and all the various knowledge types, whereas the link between political knowledge and activity was found to be weaker once the

influence of political interest was excluded. Political activity seems to be linked only to applied political knowledge, and then only indirectly through the mediation of a further factor known as political self-efficacy, that is, the subjective perception that one's own action can achieve hoped-for outcomes (see pp. 309–310). On the whole, the results show that the discrepancy between the competence of people who act in this domain and people who merely have some interest in it is less marked than in other domains, probably because the shift from interest to action heavily depends on non-knowledge-related factors, such as the perception of one's power to influence people and events.

Another study of the relationship between political activity and knowledge has examined how the concepts of *politics* and *politician* differ in militants and nonmilitants (Catellani, 1990; Catellani & Quadrio, 1991). The hypothesis was that the different sociocultural backgrounds of subjects would result in different perceptions of the two concepts in both quantitative and qualitative terms. Quantitatively, the study shows that militants have a more complex perception of the abstract concept (of politics), in the sense that they see it as having more defining traits, whereas the opposite is true of the concrete concept (of politician). This is probably because greater familiarity with politicians produces the perception that politicians vary widely in type, and a corresponding reluctance to identify defining traits. In qualitative analysis, attention shifts from the processes to the contents of the representation so as to explore any differences between the perception of politics in the two groups, and how this perception relates to the perception of politicians. The results showed that the traits both groups perceived as most typical of politicians (ambition, interest in power, etc.) are fairly consistent with the militant concept of politics as gaining and exercising power, but not with the more moralistic nonmilitant concept of politics which sees power as a means to achieve personal ends rather than a functional aspect of practical politics.

Generally speaking, the relationship between political involvement and knowledge deserves to be studied more closely, and may benefit from a more explicitly social approach to the study of knowledge. To understand when and how knowledge is translated into action, we cannot take as our only object of study a cognizer who is isolated from the rest of reality. We must also take into account the social context the subject lives in, the notions he or she shares with other people, relationships with other people, the actions these relationships make possible, and so on.

Decision making

One of the subject's aims in processing political information is to be able to choose between political alternatives (e.g. when voting). Economic decision-making models (see Chapter 2 of this volume) assume that subjects behave rationally when deciding how to vote: their aim is to derive maximum personal utility from their decisions, so they use economic indicators (e.g. inflation, unemployment) to help them to decide. However, in real life subjects

are often unfamiliar with these indicators; and even if they were not, the fact remains, as we have repeatedly observed, that the information available to them is usually not acquired first-hand but mediated through other sources, and has probably been manipulated or distorted along the way. If to this we add the fact that a country's economic and political situation is influenced by complex international trends and adjustments, it is easy to see that subjects are unable to predict with any accuracy what the consequences of their decisions are likely to be. And yet, economic theories still assume that people behave rationally – even in cases (as here) of decision making under uncertainty – and that statistics, and probability theory especially, are what influence decision makers most.

More recent psychological studies of decision making have abandoned this approach (cf. Chapter 2), embracing instead the cognitivist tenet that rationality is limited by human memory and information-processing capability, and is also influenced by many other psychological factors. Tversky and Kahneman's prospect theory (1981) adopts the newer approach, and has also been applied to the political sphere.

Economic theories usually conclude that people are basically risk averse. In voting, this means that they tend to vote for the known rather than the unknown, even if the unknown seems more attractive. By contrast, Tversky and Kahneman's prospect theory (1981) says that the attitude towards risk is influenced by how information is presented or framed. What matters is how individuals evaluate the outcomes of the choices posed by the decision-making problem, and how this evaluation explains their attitudes towards risk. On the whole, people tend to avoid risk if the future looks good, and accept it if the future looks bad.

Quattrone and Tversky (1988) have applied prospect theory to voting decisions. In a series of experiments, they gave subjects different information regarding the possible effects of choosing either one or the other of two economic or political policies, and then asked them to say how they would vote. In one experiment, subjects were told that, according to the predictions of economists, choosing party A would result in 12 per cent inflation, while choosing party B would result in a 0.5 probability of zero inflation *and* a 0.5 probability of 24 per cent inflation. When inflation figures showed that the future would probably be an improvement on the past, most subjects chose party A, but when they showed a worsening they chose party B, the riskier option.

Prospect theory has also been used to explain the political decision-making processes that come into operation when tackling serious international political issues. One example is McDermott's study (1992) of President Carter's behaviour during his mission to free American hostages in Iran in April 1980. The home and overseas political situation was crumbling, so after much diplomacy Carter decided to accept the risks of hard-line military action to avoid further setbacks in a home political context that was already extremely difficult. However, as prospect theory says, running great risks also implies accepting the possibility of great losses, and in fact, Carter's mission ended in a dramatic defeat.

Of the psychological dimensions that influence the decisions of both political leaders and ordinary voters, social factors linked to the presence of other people in the decision-making context are certainly among the most important. Leaving aside group decision-making, which has been widely studied in any case, it will be useful here to mention another two social factors which influence decision making in leaders and ordinary citizens respectively.

Decision making in leaders is a matter of consensus (Farnham, 1990). The aim of politicians is to act effectively in the context in which they find themselves, and to do this they must have an adequate consensus. In this respect, the political context differs from other contexts where the principal aim is usually to maximize utility. Politicians are mainly interested in the *acceptability* of their decisions, not simply because they need approval but because consensus is the prerequisite for every effective political action.

In the case of ordinary citizens, especially when they have to vote, it is obvious that an individual's decision will result in a hoped-for outcome only if many other people make the same decision. In a study of what determines the decision to vote rather than abstain, Quattrone and Tversky (1984) showed that deciding to vote for a certain party is usually supported by the subjective perception that other supporters of the same party will make the same decision, and the party will win. This process is known as 'voters' illusion', the fact that subjects mistakenly believe that their own choices have influenced the choices of others. One cognitive explanation for this is that subjects tend to extend to others the attitude-behaviour coherence they themselves show when they choose to vote for the party they support.

Attitudes and political beliefs

We have already seen that, in a political context, evaluation is a crucial component of knowledge itself. The reason for devoting a separate section to attitudes and political beliefs is not that they lie outside the cognitive domain, but that their study cannot be limited to the cognitive processes that underlie them, and must extend to a whole range of other personal and situational factors that interact with cognitive factors. The 'social cognition' approach has certainly given an important boost to attitude studies because it emphasizes the cognitive processes that determine attitudes, but it is equally true that a comprehensive study of attitudes both inside and (especially) outside the laboratory includes other factors like the role of affect in expressing attitudes, the motivations that underlie attitudes, the functions that attitudes perform, and the impact that contingent situational factors and more general cultural factors have on attitudes.

Evaluation of candidates and political issues

Cognitively, evaluation is the process by which subjects integrate the information available to them. One crucial issue here is the relative importance of the

various types of information available, and when this information is actually integrated. Two explanations have been proposed, and both have been partially validated by research results. The first is that integration occurs after information relevant to the judgement has been retrieved; the second is that integration happens before this, on-line, simultaneously with the subject's exposure to the information.

Another critical issue in evaluation is a restatement of an issue we raised earlier in relation to the acquisition of knowledge: when subjects evaluate a politician, are their assessments based on their schematic perception of the category the politician belongs to, or on the piecemeal information they have about him (cf. Fiske & Pavelchak, 1986)? In the first case, evaluation is based on a group stereotype or the category the politician belongs to; in the second, it is based on the candidate's specific 'distinguishing' features. The second explanation has been advanced by, among others, Fishbein and Ajzen (1981), whose now classic study shows that evaluation of a candidate is a cumulative process in which all the pros and cons are added up and assessed. Subsequent studies have shown that, in evaluation, piecemeal knowledge takes priority over (more simplified) schematic knowledge when the judgement itself is complex and the interval between acquiring information and making the judgement is short.

Everything that has been said so far assumes that political knowledge influences attitudes, or rather, that available information is important in shaping evaluations. However, this does not exclude the opposite case: that political attitudes, once formed, can influence political knowledge. One example of this is the tendency to perceive as similar to one's own the political stance of a candidate we have already judged favourably for other reasons. A heuristic affective balance may be at work here which leads subjects to attribute ideas they like (ones that are similar to their own) to a person they like, and ideas they don't like to a person they don't like.

A study by Ottati, Fishbein and Middlestadt (1988) attempted to gauge to what extent a heuristic balance of this sort may be influential, irrespective of the objective information a subject has about a candidate. During the Reagan vs. Mondale presidential campaign, a sample of subjects was given a series of statements describing candidates' attitudes to a number of political issues. Some of the statements could be classified as true, in the sense that they reflected the real attitude of the candidate (e.g. 'Reagan is in favor of increased defense spending', 'Mondale is in favor of defense cuts'), while others could be classified as false (e.g. 'Reagan is in favor of defense cuts', 'Mondale is in favor of increased defense spending'). For each statement, subjects were asked to indicate the probability that it was true on a scale from -3 (improbable) to +3 (probable). Subjects' attitudes to the two candidates, and to the political issues contained in the statements, were also measured.

The results were used to divide the subjects into two groups. In group 1, true statements matched the subjects' own statements but false statements did not; in group 2, the opposite was the case. Obviously, if the heuristic balance had not had some influence, the truth value attributed to the true statements would have been the same in both groups. But, as Figure 11.4 shows,

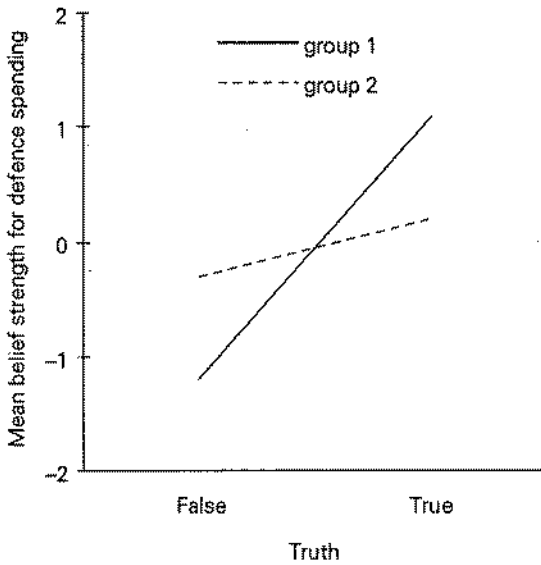


Figure 11.4 Effect of an affective balance heuristic (Ottati, Fishbein, & Middlestadt, 1988). Mean belief strength for the defence spending issue as a function of truth of candidates' statements. In group 1 true statements match the subjects' own positions; in group 2 they do not match

attributed truth value is greater in group 1, in which the statements themselves are coherent with those of the subjects expressing judgement.

From these results and those of other studies, we may conclude with Ottati and Wyer (1993) that knowledge of a candidate is both the determinant (reason) and consequence (rationalization) of a subject's attitudes to that candidate.

The problem of the relationship between attitudes and behaviour has featured widely in attitude studies (cf. Chapter 1). The problem is especially relevant to political attitudes because one of the most urgent demands that politicians make of both sociologists and psychologists is that they should find ways of describing attitudes that also provide the most accurate forecasts possible of how people will vote. Responding to this need, pre-election opinion polls of the relative popularity of political parties are now so commonplace that we might well ask whether knowledge of the results of these polls in itself constitutes information that may influence the attitudes of voters. Some governments believe that this is the case, and impose strict controls on the publication of opinion-poll results in the period immediately before an election. Research results to date have more or less repeated the findings of general attitude studies, and have usually adopted (though with some critical reservations) Ajzen and Fishbein's (1980) theory of reasoned action. A fuller discussion of this theory is given in Chapter 1.

Affect and cognition

Although cognitive factors play a important part in determining political attitudes, the fact remains that these attitudes are influenced by other factors, of which one, the affective dimension, has recently been the subject of several political cognition studies.

Abelson, Kinder, Peters and Fiske (1982) have examined the influence of cognitive and affective elements on evaluations of certain American politicians, including Kennedy, Carter and Bush. Cognitive elements were determined using a list of 16 traits (eight positive, like honest and smart; eight negative, like weak and power hungry) which subjects were asked to rate as more or less typical of each politician by responding to questions such as: 'Does the word *honest* describe Carter extremely well, very well, pretty well, or not very well at all?' Affective elements were determined using a list of positive (e.g. happy, proud) and negative (e.g. sad, angry) emotions. Subjects were asked to say (yes-no answers) which of these emotions the politicians elicited in them, by responding to questions like: 'Think about your feelings when I mention Carter. Now, has Carter - because of the kind of person he is or because of something he has done - ever made you feel: angry? happy? . . . etc.'. Finally, evaluations were obtained by asking subjects to express their preference for each politician on a scale ranging from 0 (extremely unfavourable) to 100 (extremely favourable). The results showed that emotions (especially positive ones) are good predictors of evaluative response, and that this effect is independent of and greater than the predictive value of politicians' personal traits.

In addition to the direct influence they have on evaluation, emotions probably have other more indirect, mediated effects. Some studies indicate that the emotions experienced when political information is acquired may be stored in the memory as part of the representation of the message referent, even if the emotions were caused by something other than the message itself. People who create election advertising deliberately try to achieve effects of this type. For example, a candidate's message may be accompanied or immediately preceded by situations or scenarios that involve viewers and elicit positive emotions.

Conservatives/liberals

In moving from the study of individual attitudes to how they are organized in more complex structures, we immediately encounter a factor that is crucially important in political psychology: the ideological dimension. Political cognition studies see the ideological dimension mainly as a way of organizing political knowledge, but it can also be seen, and has already long been studied, in relation to other factors that may be individual (personality, values, motivation, ultimate needs) as well as social (role, position of power, social and political context). So here we shall examine the ideological

dimension as an organizing principle of attitudes in terms of function and content, rather than as a universal human process.

The ideological dimension is usually described in terms of liberal/conservative polarity. The political organization of many countries is based on this duality: even where there are more than two political parties, they tend to be located across a broad spectrum that unites the two poles. This said, people have been arguing for years over *which* dimensions political beliefs are organized around, and psychology has a long way to go before it can supply a satisfactory answer to this question. In the mean time, let us look at some of the major approaches to the problems ideology raises.

The fundamental text, now universally cited, is Adorno's collective study *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950) which presented the results of a wide-ranging quantitative survey of racial prejudice, and anti-Semitism in particular, in the United States. Its key assumption was that individual political beliefs are the expression of a system, and that this system in turn consistently reflects the profound dynamics of human personality, which Adorno and his colleagues interpreted psychoanalytically. A variety of structured and unstructured instruments were used to explore a range of issues in the study, in the hope of finding some correlation between them. These issues were (a) anti-Semitism; (b) ethnocentricity; (c) political and economic conservatism; (d) anti-democratic tendencies and potential fascism. In their study of (d), Adorno and his colleagues used the so-called F Scale, which itemizes what were taken to be the three principal traits of the authoritarian personality: *conventionality*, strict adherence to conventional middle-class values; *authoritarian submission*, uncritical, unrealistic, emotion-based respect for idealized moral figures; and *authoritarian aggression*, hostility towards people who violate widely-held conventional values.

In keeping with their psychoanalytical approach, Adorno and his colleagues located the origin of these authoritarian traits in early childhood experience, and in relationships with parental authority figures especially. Since then, others have analysed their material in a rather different, functionalist way to demonstrate that specific attitudes and prejudices may be expressions of ego-defensive needs.

Adorno's pioneering work has been indispensable to many later studies of both the authoritarian personality and ideological orientation, although it has also received its share of criticism. Purely methodological criticisms have been made of Adorno's sampling procedures, which many now regard as unsatisfactory, and his formulation of F-Scale items, which some believe may have encouraged acquiescent answers in subjects. These criticisms have led to the development of new scales, like Altemeyer's RWA Scale (1981) (Figure 11.5).

What interest us most here, however, are criticisms of Adorno's account of the relationship between authoritarianism and the conservative/liberal (or right-wing/left-wing) ideological dimension. The suitability of the F Scale as a measure of potential fascism or right-wing authoritarianism can already be challenged on the basis of Adorno's own data, which did, admittedly, establish a correlation, though not a very significant one, between authoritarianism and the ideological dimension. Subsequent research has confirmed that

1. Laws have to be strictly enforced if we are going to preserve our way of life.
- *2. People should pay less attention to the Bible and the other old traditional forms of religious guidance, and instead develop their own personal standards of what is moral and immoral.
3. Women should always remember the promise they make in the marriage ceremony to obey their husbands.
4. Our customs and national heritage are the things that have made us great, and certain people should be made to show greater respect for them.
- *5. Capital punishment should be completely abolished.
- *6. National anthems, flags and glorification of one's country should all be de-emphasized to promote the brotherhood of all men.
7. The facts on crime, sexual immorality and the recent public disorders all show we have to crack down harder on deviant groups and troublemakers if we are going to save our moral standards and preserve law and order.
- *8. A lot of our society's rules regarding modesty and sexual behaviour are just customs which are not necessarily any better or holier than those which other peoples follow.
- *9. Our prisons are a shocking disgrace. Criminals are unfortunate people who deserve much better care, instead of so much punishment.
10. Obedience and respect for authority are the most important virtues children should learn.
- *11. Organizations like the army and the priesthood have a pretty unhealthy effect upon men because they require strict obedience of commands from supervisors.
12. One good way to teach certain people right from wrong is to give them a good stiff punishment when they get out of line.
- *13. Youngsters should be taught to refuse to fight in a war unless they themselves agree the war is just and necessary.
14. It may be considered old-fashioned by some, but having a decent, respectable appearance is still the mark of a gentleman and, especially, a lady.
15. In these troubled times laws have to be enforced without mercy, especially when dealing with the agitators and revolutionaries who are stirring things.
- *16. Atheists and others who have rebelled against the established religions are no doubt every bit as good and virtuous as those who attend church regularly.
17. Young people sometimes get rebellious ideas, but as they grow up they ought to get over them and settle down.
- *18. Rules about being 'well-mannered' and respectable are chains from the past that we should question very thoroughly before accepting.
- *19. The courts are right in being easy on drug offenders. Punishment would not do any good in cases like these.
20. If a child starts becoming a little too unconventional his parents should see to it he returns to the normal ways expected by society.
21. Being kind to loafers or criminals will only encourage them to take advantage of your weakness, so it's best to use a firm, tough hand when dealing with them.
- *22. A 'woman's place' should be wherever she wants to be. The days when women are submissive to their husbands and social conventions belong strictly in the past.
- *23. Homosexuals are just as good and virtuous as anybody else, and there is nothing wrong with being one.
24. It's one thing to question and doubt someone during an election campaign, but once a man becomes the leader of our country we owe him our greatest support and loyalty.

Figure 11.5 *Altemeyer's RWA (right-wing authoritarianism) scale (Altemeyer, 1981). Each item is valued on a six-point scale, ranging from 'disagree strongly' to 'agree strongly'. Items marked * are reversed items*

authoritarian attitudes are more common in right-wing subjects than in left-wing subjects, although in some cases authoritarianism is more often found in left-wing subjects than in moderate subjects. More generally, it seems likely that the sample material in both Adorno's and other later studies is biased in any case because it was gathered in countries like the United States and Great Britain where left-wing subjects are on the whole well educated and politically aware, and form a fairly homogeneous minority. By contrast, left-wing authoritarianism may well be a feature of Communist countries, where any sample would perforce be more heterogeneous.

Irrespective of whether a relationship between ideology and authoritarianism can be demonstrated, studies of the conservative/liberal dimension continue to run into problems, if only because there is some doubt as to whether this dimension is the only, or at least the most important, principle that shapes political attitudes.

In Tetlock's value pluralism model (1986), conservative and liberal stances differ in terms of reference values. Tetlock maintains that in all political ideologies we can identify a set of core or 'terminal' values (see Rokeach, 1973) that define the ultimate aims of any political act (e.g. social equality, economic efficiency, individual freedom). According to Tetlock, the two stances, conservative and liberal, differ in both 'terminal' reference values, and in their tolerance of conflict between these values. For example, the centre-left ideology of Western democracies is characterized by high levels of value conflict, and issues such as redistributive income policies have to be tackled by trying to reconcile values like social equality and economic freedom, which usually conflict with each other in some way. As we shall see in the next subsection, greater conflict produces greater cognitive complexity in subjects who share this centre-left ideology.

Perhaps a better understanding of how the ideological dimension influences attitudes to political issues may come from studies that go beyond differences of political opinion as such to address differences in the causal structures that underlie them. One example is a study by Heaven (1994) which explores the perception of poverty in subjects of different ideological orientations. Side-stepping the problem of scale-based measurement of ideological orientation, Heaven instead asked people who had voted respectively Conservative and Labour to say what they thought the probable causes of poverty were. Using structural equation models to reconstruct the hierarchical structure of immediate and remote causes, he found that ideological differences appear not so much in immediate causes (which in both groups were largely social, e.g. prejudice, exploitation of the weak by the strong) as in remote causes (mainly internal in Conservatives, e.g. moral or intellectual poverty, and both internal and social in Labour supporters).

Some studies have attempted to explore the relationship between conservative vs. liberal ideology and moral reasoning. According to Emler, Renwick and Malone (1983), individual differences in moral reasoning reflect differences in political ideology. Thus, the kind of moral reasoning we use when judging issues does not depend on our level of cognitive development, as Kohlberg claims (1976), but on the political ideologies we possess. Liberal ideology is

typically opposed to the status quo, so the people who share it will be more inclined to use general moral principles when describing their political stances, rather than simple rules or conventions. Their reasoning will be post-conventional, the highest level of moral reasoning in Kohlberg's hierarchy. By contrast, those who share right-wing ideologies, and support tradition and the maintenance of the status quo, will argue that law and order in society should be upheld. As a result, they will use conventional reasoning, which comes lower down in Kohlberg's hierarchy of moral development.

Ideological orientation and cognitive style

Conservative-liberal ideological orientation has also been related to other dimensions of mental functioning. In a long line of studies (for a review see Tetlock, 1993), Philip Tetlock has explored one particular aspect of cognitive style called *integrative complexity* by analysing texts written by politicians on a given issue and coding two features of the text called differentiation and integration. Differentiation is measured by the number of distinct dimensions subjects take account of in an issue, and integration is measured by the number of links subjects make between the various dimensions. Initially, and very much in line with previous studies, Tetlock measured integrative complexity using sentence-completion tests, but later used archive material (speeches by politicians, American Supreme Court rulings) to enhance the external validity of his research.

The relationship between ideological stance and cognitive style has been explained in at least two ways. One explanation, which Tetlock defines as the 'rigidity of the right', derives substantially from Adorno, and says essentially that the reasoning of right-wing subjects is more dogmatic and rigid, less subtle – in a word, simpler – than that of left-wing subjects. Tetlock defines the other explanation as 'ideological', in the sense that it is extremists in general, of either the right or the left, rather than right-wing extremists only, who are more dogmatic, rigid, etc. than moderate subjects. The inconsistent results Tetlock obtained in his various studies prevent us from confirming either hypothesis. This has led to the formulation of more complex hypotheses that take into account the context in which integrative complexity is measured and, more specifically, the issue the subject is reading about and the role he played when the text was formulated. Let us look at these two features separately.

In keeping with the value pluralism model he proposes, Tetlock claims that some issues are related to only one core value, so that an individual's attitude to the issue reflects the force of that particular value. Other issues may relate to a set of conflicting values, which makes the subject integratively more complex.

In his study of the value pluralism model (1986), Tetlock recorded the preferences of a sample of subjects regarding six political issues that would presumably lead to conflict between a variety of terminal value pairs in the Rokeach Value Survey (Rokeach, 1973). Subjects were asked questions like:

'Would you be willing to pay higher taxes in order to provide more assistance to the poor?' (conflicting values: social equality vs. comfortable and prosperous life); or, 'Should the United States spend more on national defense even if such spending requires lowering the standard of living of most Americans?' (conflicting values: national security vs. comfortable and prosperous life). Tetlock then gave his subjects the Rokeach Value Survey to obtain their terminal value hierarchies. Finally, subjects were asked to write down their thoughts about each of the six political issues, and the integrative complexity of what they wrote was measured.

Regression analyses showed first that the best predictor of a subject's attitude is which of the two conflicting values the subject attributes most importance to. They also showed that the integrative complexity of what the subjects wrote increases proportionally to similarity in the degree of importance subjects attribute to the pair of values the issue itself raises, and so also proportionally to the value conflict the issue provokes in the subject. This would explain why the integrative complexity of subjects varies depending on the issue in question.

The subject's role – for example, being or not being in a position to exercise power – also influences integrative complexity. Tetlock and Boettger (1989) analysed speeches by Soviet politicians before and after they rose to power and found that integrative complexity was greater once they were in power. Their explanation is that people fighting for power win consensus by giving clear, simple messages that clarify how their political stances differ from those of other politicians. By contrast, politicians who have gained power have to reconcile and mediate a variety of stances, so level of integrative complexity tends to rise. This explanation contains echoes of studies of minority influence (see Moscovici, 1976), and research of this issue might progress even further if a more explicitly psychosocial approach were adopted.

Tetlock draws the following conclusions from his research: (a) centre and left-of-centre subjects show greater integrative complexity in response to certain issues because they have to reconcile conflicting values; (b) irrespective of ideological stance or issue, some situations (e.g. being in a position of power) call for greater integrative complexity than others.

Political participation

In this final section we shall shift our attention away from conceptual and evaluative politics to political activity itself. We have already looked several times at the question of political behaviour, and of voting behaviour especially, because political attitudes and knowledge are often regarded as precursors of behaviour. However, in this section devoted entirely to political behaviour, or rather, political *activity*, we shall look at more obviously social factors which are essential to understanding how an action takes place because they operate both alongside and in addition to individual ones. Focusing attention on action and, more specifically, political action, entails studying individuals not just as reasoning beings who take decisions and make

judgements in variously rational and/or emotional ways, but also as subjects who perform all these functions in a social context which they influence with their actions, and are influenced by in turn. It is certainly both possible and appropriate to identify the fundamental processes that guide mental activity, but it is also true that how these processes work in real life is influenced by the social situations (couple, group, collective) an individual's life is composed of.

This is even more so when politics is the object of study. What is politics if not a system created to regulate the relationships between people and groups? In the end, politics is essentially a matter of social and power relationships. By studying these relationships, we can finally arrive at a social psychology of politics in the narrower sense of the term.

The political action we shall be concerned with here is not the action of politicians, which is the prerogative of a small number of people, even if what politicians do is of absorbing interest to everyone because of the effects it has on society. The actions of politicians have been the subject of many studies of decision making, conflict management and political negotiation in national and international contexts, so for reasons of space we shall concentrate, first, on political action that involves the greatest number of citizens, that is, voting; and secondly, on militant action, which is much more limited and yet highly relevant to the study of social change.

Choosing a political party

Descriptions of the cognitive processes that underlie political evaluation have now reached highly sophisticated levels, but despite this, the factors they employ have not proved especially reliable predictors of voting behaviour.

While political cognition studies have concentrated on psychological factors of exclusively individual origin, studies of voting behaviour have long had a sociological orientation that highlights the structural factors (e.g. sex, age, education, residence, occupation) one can use to predict voting behaviour. That said, the predictive reliability of sociostructural factors is not particularly impressive either. Only recently have we seen psychosocial studies that attempt to integrate structural and individual factors in an effort to explain more satisfactorily how people really behave when they vote. We shall look at these studies, after a brief survey of some of the more important models used to describe voting behaviour.

Any survey of these models must begin with the work of Campbell, Converse, Miller and Stokes (1960), which will henceforth be referred to as the 'Michigan model'. Campbell and his colleagues broke with the explicitly sociological orientation of previous studies because they wanted to explain voting behaviour using the psychological factor of identification with a political party. According to Campbell, voting choices are not based on political knowledge, which is usually minimal and inconsistent, but on party affiliation rooted in tradition and, especially, the family environment individuals grow up in. Campbell explains this psychoanalytically as identification with the party, which is remarkably stable because it is acquired at an early age.

Later studies have challenged the Michigan model. Himmelweit's 'consumer model' (Himmelweit, Humpreys, Jaeger, & Katz, 1985) developed from studies of British voting behaviour, and points to substantial congruence between individuals' and parties' positions on political issues, which suggests that, when historical and political situations change, it is more appropriate to speak of 'issue-voting' rather than identification with political parties. Again based on the British situation, Heath, Jowell and Curtice's 'ideological model' (1985) claims that voting is influenced not by issue-beliefs but by more general belief structures to which individual issues can be related. Heath et al. go even further when they claim that people support political parties whose attitudes are similar to their own in terms of the two specific ideological dimensions of equality and liberalism/conservatism (see pp. 299-303).

One criticism levelled at all the models we have looked at so far is that they fail to make any significant conceptual or explanatory distinction between dependent and independent variables (Evans, 1993). Campbell's model explains voting by identification with the party, but then uses voting to measure degree of identification, so models like Himmelweit's consumer model, which explains voting for a certain party in terms of sharing its position on general or specific political issues, are perhaps unconvincing in the last analysis. And there is still the problem of how to reconcile mutually contradictory models and establish exactly what determines whether voting is based on candidates/parties or on issues.

One solution may be to try to explain voting using models that integrate sociostructural factors with individual psychological factors. Several social psychologists have attempted to do this using social identity theory (e.g. Tajfel and Turner, 1986), in which 'social identity' means the awareness of individuals that they belong to a certain social group, combined with the significance of this sense of belonging in evaluative and emotional terms. The basic assumption is that individuals actively seek a positive social identity because it boosts their positive self-esteem, and that they try to form this identity by comparing their own social group with other groups and displaying 'positive in-group distinctiveness'.

Social identity has been used in psychosocial interpretations of regional and local variations in voting patterns, an issue to which sociologists (e.g. Heath) have repeatedly drawn attention. Abrams and Emler's study (1991) of the political choices of young Scots and Britons has shown that identification with a political party for regional reasons may serve to uphold the portion of the subject's social identity that specifically derives from a sense of regional belonging. Thus, if being a Labour supporter is part of the Scottish identity, identification with the Labour party will serve to strengthen this identity, even when it conflicts with the subject's personal interests. Expressive values like identification with particular groups seem to take priority over instrumental values like choosing a party on the assumption that it will secure economic advantages for the voter.

The question of the stability of this identification with political parties, which Campbell describes but others have not always confirmed, has also been tackled in a new way by borrowing from general studies of social identity. For

Table 11.1 Percentage of each political category giving different reasons for voting decisions

Support party because . . .	Non/ uncertain voters (n=408)	Labour/ Tory voters (n=1252)	Minority voters (n=347)	Chi square (non versus majority versus minority)	Chi square (majority versus minority)
Has best leaders	47.3	54.1	30.3	62.09**	60.79**
Agree with basic ideals	92.6	94.3	98.1	13.40*	7.82*
Best policies	90.0	87.0	77.1	28.43**	18.84**
Represents people like me	76.5	77.2	84.7	10.08*	130.88**
Family supports it	11.3	50.1	15.6	275.50**	130.88**

* $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.0001$

Source: Abrams (1994)

example, Abrams (1994) borrowed and applied to the issue of political party belonging an insight from studies of group belonging in other fields; namely, that medium-sized groups probably work better from the psychological point of view because they encourage identification. In the political sphere, this may mean that stable identification with a party is more likely in the case of minority parties because they are structured in ways that encourage identification.

Abrams's data source is the same as that in the previous study, i.e. a large-scale survey of young Britons. One question subjects were asked was which party they would vote for if there were an election; a later question asked them to say why they would have voted in that way. Table 11.1 lists the reasons given by subjects who were uncertain how to vote, subjects who supported majority parties, and subjects who supported minority parties. Supporters of minority parties tended to say that they agreed with the basic ideals of the party of their choice, and that this party represented people like them. By contrast, supporters of majority parties tended to say that the party of their choice had the best leader or the best political programme, or that they had chosen the party simply because their parents would have chosen it. Thus, Abrams's results show that support for majority parties is an outcome of rational and instrumental reasoning, while support for minority parties is more closely linked to identification.

Political activity

While voting (or deciding not to vote) is something that affects all adult citizens, the same cannot be said of other types of political activity that call for active involvement in public affairs. It may be true that periods of transition or institutional crisis tend to generate greater desire for political involvement on the part of citizens, but several recent studies, mainly of younger people in Western countries (e.g. Breakwell, 1992), seem to indicate widespread disenchantment with political involvement. This may be linked to a deeply rooted ideological crisis that is deterring young people from

identifying with conventional political categories. Some confirmation of this comes from the activities of environmental and voluntary groups, which now seem magnets for political involvement. Clearly, the desire for involvement is not extinct, but is seeking other outlets. For this and other reasons, our definition of political activity here will be rather broad so as to include nonparty groups. In general, the focus will be on purposefully voluntary action whose principal aim is to influence political decisions.

One of the first questions we have to answer is: how can political activity be measured? Measuring instruments usually record the perceptions of subjects using indicators like frequency of party or group meetings, leafleting, etc. Obviously, people will not always have an entirely accurate perception of their own political involvement, but for the purposes of psychological research, subjective involvement is a useful, if not the most useful, indicator. Another question is whether political activity is a one-dimensional or multidimensional construct. Some studies have used factor analysis techniques to identify various dimensions of involvement, but the results have been challenged on methodological grounds: However, in trade union involvement at least, a one-dimensional model seems the most accurate and realistic. More specifically, it may be possible to measure level of involvement on a Guttman scale, assuming that participation in high-level activities (e.g. being a member of a union commission) includes (or has included in the past) participation in lower-level activities (e.g. voting to elect union representatives) (Kelloway & Barling, 1993).

Another distinction frequently used in describing political activity is the one between 'conventional' and 'unconventional' activities. The kind of involvement and the personal characteristics called for by these two types of activity may be different, although we should not forget that an activity which starts off as unconventional may later acquire conventional forms of organization and expression. This shift from one type of activity to another may often coincide with a process widely studied in social psychology (see Moscovici, 1976) that enables an active minority to influence a majority. For example, an activity like throwing rotten eggs at women wearing fur coats to opera premières, which would be regarded as unconventional for an environmental group, may eventually prove so popular that it transforms itself into a conventional activity like signing petitions to have fur factories closed.

As with voting behaviour, studies of political activity have borrowed widely from sociology, especially in its use of sociostructural factors linked to political involvement, including sex and level of education, with greater political activity in highly educated males. Psychological studies of this initially placed the accent on personality factors like authoritarianism and dogmatism which encourage political activity, but more recent theoretical studies of personality have adopted a more interactive approach which sees personality not as a given entity, but as the outcome of interaction between individuals and the situations they have to act in (see Krampen, 1991). These and other more explicitly psychosocial studies have enabled us to identify a series of psychosociological factors associated with the desire for involvement in collective action (see Kelly & Kelly, 1994; Klandermans, 1995). We shall look here at the three that have been studied most widely.

Relative deprivation

One factor that seems to generate collective action is a subject's perception that he or she has suffered injustice and has been discriminated against. This factor includes not only the perception of breakdown in values that are held to be important (e.g. the right to work, education), but also the perception that others are responsible for this breakdown, and that a different states of affairs might be possible. This 'trigger' for political action has so far been the most widely studied factor in social psychology. Deprivation has been defined as *egoistic* when an individual believes that he or she has been discriminated against with respect to others, and *collective* when the individual believes that his or her group has been discriminated against with respect to others. Several studies have now shown that collective deprivation correlates with collective action.

Social identity

Our discussion of collective deprivation already implies the concept of ingroup and outgroup, 'us' and 'them'. We have seen that social identity is based on the sense of belonging to a group and, we should perhaps now add, on shared beliefs and aims. There has been speculation that strong social identity is one of the factors that generates collective action, but only when this identity is the outcome of belonging to particular types of group. Borrowing a distinction made by Hinkle and Brown (1990), Kelly and Kelly (1994) stress that social identity generates collective action if it is the outcome of belonging to a group that is oriented anyway towards collective action and human relationships (political groups, trade unions, environmental groups, etc.), and not to groups that encourage individualism and independent activity (hobby groups, sport, etc.). We now also know that there is a two-way relationship between social identity and collective action: involvement in collective action boosts a group's identity.

The emphasis on social identity has also raised the question of whether other factors that correlate with this construct, for example stereotyped perception of the outgroup, level of intergroup conflict, are also linked to collective action, but research results so far have been inconclusive.

Perceived self and group efficacy

Researchers have hypothesized that individuals are unlikely to undertake political action unless they believe they will obtain something by doing so. Psychologists have long regarded self-efficacy – an individual's expectation that he or she will help to produce a successful outcome – as a key factor in political involvement. However, predictions of the outcome of a political action can also be interpreted in a more social way by taking into account the fact that the success of a collective action depends precisely on the fact that it involves several people, and that predictions of the outcome of an action must be based on the contributions of all these other people, as well as on the individual's own contribution. Self-efficacy is only one of a subject's expectations: there are also two other expectations, or perceived probabilities, one concerned with the

behaviour of others, the other concerned with the perceived likelihood of success if many others participate in a given political action.

These three factors, or rather, classes of factors, are probably interrelated, although to what extent and in what ways is still unclear. For example, Kelly and Kelly (1994) have found some (slight) confirmation of the hypothesis that relative deprivation plays an important role in generating political action when social identity is strong, whereas self-efficacy plays a more important role when social identity is weak. Another study by Catellani, Balzarini and Cardinali (1995), dealing with local, national and European political identity and action, has found a positive link between weak social identity and self-efficacy. Not surprisingly, it shows that self-efficacy decreases as the range of possible actions increases (e.g. from a local to a European context). And yet, despite this, the factor is a reliable indicator of European identity (weak in the study), but a poor one of national and local identity (strong in the study). The reason for this may be that an individual trait like self-efficacy starts to generate political involvement mainly (if not exclusively) when social identity fails to materialize, although only future research will be able to confirm this.

In this chapter we have regarded political psychology as a discipline that studies the cognitive, evaluative and behavioural dimensions of political 'actors', whether these be ordinary citizens or the politicians elected or delegated to represent them.

In examining the cognitive dimension, we looked at how information about political issues and politicians is processed, crucial factors in determining the formation of political competence and decision-making processes. In tackling these questions, researchers have sometimes limited themselves to extending to the political sphere models developed in other fields of inquiry, and to replicating with political content results already obtained with different content in other areas. However, further studies have revealed features that seem more specific to the political sphere, like the importance of the media as information filters, and the consequences this has on information processing and the acquisition of competence.

In examining the evaluative dimension, we looked at how people judge the people called upon to represent them, and discussed in some depth an issue of crucial importance to political studies, namely ideological stance, as revealed in studies based either on traditional left/right or conservative/liberal dichotomies, or on several dimensions, meaning that political attitudes are organized around certain core values.

In examining the behavioural dimension, a number of more strictly social variables were highlighted. In particular, we saw that social identity influences voting choice and political activity, and that these in turn tend to reinforce social identity. Social variables certainly merit much closer study on the part of political psychologists because, in the last analysis, politics is nothing other than a system created to regulate interpersonal and intergroup relationships.

Further reading

- Granberg, D. & Holmberg, S. (1988). *The political system matters: Social psychology and voting behavior in Sweden and United States*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. This volume presents a detailed instance of collaboration between a social psychologist and a political scientist. It is also a good example of empirical research in the domain of voting behaviour.
- Iyengar, S. & McGuire, W.J. (Eds) (1993). *Explorations in political psychology*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. Provides an excellent overview of research in political psychology.
- The journal *Political Psychology* is also an excellent source for further reading.