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Mass Political Behavior

Ingrid J. Haas & Stephen P. Schneider

Mass political behavior is the study of how average citizens form and express opinions about politics and decide how to engage with the political system through voting or other forms of political participation. Political scientists interested in mass political behavior have drawn on a variety of disciplinary approaches to understand the topic, including history, economics, sociology, and more recently, psychology, biology, and neuroscience. Political psychologists interested in understanding mass political behavior have applied social psychological theories of attitudes, emotion, social cognition, and social identity to help improve our understanding of political behavior. This entry provides a brief overview of how psychology has been used to study public opinion, voting behavior, and political participation.

Public Opinion

Public opinion is the study of political attitudes in the aggregate, focused on measuring how the public feels about policy issues. The study of public opinion is often based on large-scale survey data collection, with a focus on understanding the following aspects of public opinion: direction, stability, intensity, and salience. *Direction* refers to the extent to which the public supports or opposes a given policy issue, while *stability* focuses on the extent to which public opinion remains stable over time. *Intensity* is an indicator of how strong people's attitudes are, or how important the issue is to them. Finally, *salience* refers to the extent to which the issue is at the forefront of political discussion and debate. Elected officials are most likely to pay attention to public opinion when public opinion has a clear direction (the public either supports or opposes the issue), is stable over time, and is high in intensity and salience.

The traditional view of public opinion in political science is that it is mainly the product of socialization, whether that involves influence from family, peers, or social organizations. More recently, political scientists have also begun to examine biological and genetic explanations for political attitudes. The conscientiousness and openness facets of personality, for example, have been found to be correlated with political ideology while also being associated with the expression of particular genes. Psychological approaches have focused on understanding how political attitudes may be tied to core values or underlying needs and goals.

Voting Behavior

One of the key forms of mass political behavior that political scientists have been interested in trying to explain is voting behavior, both in terms of explaining voter turnout (whether people decide to vote

in any given election) and vote choice (who someone decides to vote for). Voter turnout in the United States has historically been low relative to turnout in a number of other democracies, for a variety of reasons. From a rational choice theory perspective, voter turnout has been explained as the outcome of a cost-benefit analysis. From this view, it may not be necessary to vote if one thinks that his or her vote will not really influence the outcome of the election or if voting is viewed as unnecessarily difficult, such as having to register to vote in advance of an election or show proper identification in some states. Psychologically speaking, people may choose not to vote if they are disengaged from politics or fail to perceive a meaningful choice between candidates.

Scholars of mass political behavior are also interested in explaining vote choice, or which candidate someone decides to vote for when they do vote. Historically, it was assumed that citizens made this decision on the basis of the issues—examining where parties or candidates stood on the issues that were most important to them and voting accordingly. Over time, research has shown that psychological factors also impact vote choice, and perhaps to a greater degree than the traditional view of voting as the outcome of a cost-benefit analysis. People often vote based on political party identification, which can serve as a useful voting heuristic or mental shortcut. People form attachments to political parties (e.g., Democrats, Republicans), and these attachments can lead them to vote for candidates who share their political identity. Research has increasingly shown that people pay attention not just to issues but to candidate personality traits (e.g., competence, trustworthiness) and physical appearance. Recent work has even shown that people can make fairly accurate snap judgments of these traits in others just by viewing a picture of a face.

Political Participation

Political scientists interested in mass political behavior have also been interested in the study of political participation more generally, understanding why

people engage in a variety of forms of participation (not just voting). Other types of political participation might include attending a rally or a protest, contacting an elected official, or volunteering in one's local community. Historically, this work has focused on demographic variables as a way to explain who participates in politics. Individuals higher in socioeconomic status, for example, are more likely to participate, perhaps because they have higher levels of education, more disposable income, and more free time. Political sophistication, or possessing a high level of political knowledge, also tends to predict higher levels of participation.

More recent work has shown that psychological factors are relevant here, too. It is important to understand what motivates people to engage in political action. Recent work has suggested that factors like political trust (how much you trust the government) and political efficacy (whether you think your behavior will make a difference) are important here. People may be more likely to engage in traditional forms of political participation (voting, contacting an elected official) when both trust and efficacy are high. If trust in government is low but efficacy is high, people are more likely to engage in nontraditional forms of participation such as protest. If they perceive their efficacy as low, people are less likely to participate in any form.

Further Readings

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