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CONTEMPORARY ISSUES AND PERSPECTIVES ON THE STUDY OF POLITICS



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Table of Contents

Political Science: Methods, Approaches and Relationship with other Social Sciences Disciplines	01-16
Hassan A SALIU, Ph.D. & Luqman SAKA, Ph.D.	
Basic Concepts in Political Science	17-31
Fatai A. Aremu, Ph.D. & Adebola R. BAKARE, Ph.D.	
The Concept, Functions and Theories of State	32-40
Abdulkareem J. EDUN, Ph.D.	
Government Institutions and Separation of Powers	41-57
Abdulrasheed A. MUHAMMAD, Ph.D.	
Legislative Process in Nigeria's National Assembly	58-75
Adebola R. BAKARE, Ph.D.; Fatima O. ALIU & Abdulrahman, ABUBAKAR	
Public Opinion, Pressure Groups & Political Parties	76-89
Luqman SAKA, Ph.D.; Oluwashina M. ADEBIYI, Ph.D.; Abdulwaheed A. ISIAQ & Taiye A. AWOTUNDE	
Federalism and Restructuring Debate in Nigeria	91-112
Emmanuel O. OJO, Ph.D.	
The Anti-Corruption War in Nigeria: A Critical Assessment of the Problems and Prospects	113-148
Tunde AGARA, Ph.D.	
Understanding Irregular Migration from Africa to Europe	149-176
Olubukola S. ADESINA, Ph.D.	
Designing a Peace Intervention Process for Communities in Conflicts in Nigeria	177-196
Gbemisola ANIMASAWUN, Ph.D.	

PERSPECTIVES ON THE

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Introduction

Political science, like other social science disciplines has some concepts that are central and peculiar to its study. The study and examination of these concepts shows in clear terms what demarcates the discipline from other social science disciplines. This is not however to say that there are no points of convergence of the discipline of political science with other social science disciplines. But the fact remains that social science disciplines have peculiar concepts. For instance, the economists' deals with concepts such as scale of preference, marginal utility, income, demand and supply. However, central to the study of political science are concepts such as public opinion, pressure groups, political parties and party systems.

Public Opinion

Public opinion, as an important term in democratic governance, has its root in human existence. It has existed in human societies for thousands of years as a crucial force exerted on governments, rulers and individuals for creating and maintaining consensus which is a necessary pre-requisite for the proper functioning of governments and the entire society as a whole (Noelle-Neumann, 2016). Academic and contemporary discourses on public opinion revolve round important societal issues. Such discourses examine the process by which information is circulated and presented, how citizens learn about societal matters and the consequent effects of such information on the character, thoughts and behaviour of the citizens. Thus, puzzles on how citizens reach consensual decision about particular societal issues are revealed by measuring public opinion (Moy & Bosch, 2013). Public opinion is a major instrument of promoting social integration. In this regard, public

opinion has made it possible to study public opinion in micro-group settings and other spheres that are seemingly not political in nature (Noelle-Neumann, 1995)

Scholars view the concept from different perspectives depending on their perception and how they view the 'public' and assumptions on whose opinion matters (Stimson, 1999). Noelle-Neumann (2016) opines that the word 'public' in the term public opinion entails the eye of the masses which serves the function of social control. 'Opinion', however, refers to being publicly visible and audible expressions of views as well as public behaviour in terms of weighty societal issues. Public opinion has been seen as collective individual views, attitudes and beliefs about a particular societal issue which is expressed by a considerable proportion of the people of a society. The collective views can either be a combination of the views of all or a certain segment of the society or a combination of differing views (Davison, 2018). Public opinion has also been defined as the totality of views of the people within a society which takes cognizance of individual citizens, groups and elites. And it is publicized through the media (Stimson, 1999).

Public opinion as a concept possesses some multi-dimensional characteristics. Public opinion represents a particular and prevailing opinion among varied opinions. It connotes the view that is most dominant and widespread. It is also transitory, that is, it is not permanent. Furthermore, it relates to action or readiness for action with regard to a given issue on the part of members of a public who are reacting in the expectation that other members of the public are similarly oriented toward the same issue (Davison, 2018). Public opinion can be derived from political elites who have access to the media and have high degree of social influence and institutional power. It can also be derived from statistical records which signify and measure opinions elicited through surveys and people's statistical inference which is publicized by media and social environment (Dewey, 1988).

Factors Influencing Public Opinion

Public opinion does not occur in a vacuum. It is shaped and influenced by certain forces which determines what public view is. These forces are regarded as causes and predictors of public opinion. Numerous factors shape and influence public opinion. Some of these include but are not limited to the

following: mass media, values and opinion leaders.

(a) Mass Media

In contemporary times, social media has become a major source of public opinion. Mass media can either be print media like newspapers, magazines and periodicals or electronic media like radio, films and the social media. Mass media disseminate information and education that influence public opinion on matters of public interest. Mass media draw people's attention to certain public issues and encourage people to form opinions about them. Mass media play important role by all means in shaping public opinion (Yarborough, 2008).

(b) Values

One of the crucial aspects of public opinion is values. Values regard connotes the accepted principles or standards of persons. Values are very important in shaping public opinion. Values will have on a personality or a group of people, particularly from parents and family. Values are developed as people develop. Values include moral standards, race and occupation.

(c) Environmental Factors

Environmental factors are important in shaping public opinion. A crucial part of development of public opinion is environmental factors which include family, peer group, school, religion, etc. People are usually reformed in their behaviour by their groups or peers (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2019). Environmental factor that influence public opinion is assumed that during hard economic times, the privileged to fellow citizens. The proposition, however, has been challenged. Also, political factors are important in shaping public opinion. For instance, citizens identify themselves with one political party.

following: mass media, values, environmental factors, pressure groups and opinion leaders.

(a) Mass Media

In contemporary times, social media is the most influential shaper of public opinion. Mass media can either be print or electronic. Print media includes newspapers, magazines and posters. Electronic media includes: television, radio, films and the social media platforms. The mass media is a source of information and education that influence the perception and views of people on matters of public interest (Hadeshian, 2006). The mass media draw people's attention to certain personalities and crucial issues which lead the people to form opinions about such personalities and issues. Thus, the mass media play important role by allowing individual realize the opinion of other people (Yarborough, 2008).

(b) Values

One of the crucial aspects of the study of public opinion is value. Value in this regard connotes the accepted principles or standards of a person or group of persons. Values are very important in determining the kind of view people will have on a personality or an issue. Values are derived at an early stage particularly from parents and are so difficult to change that they are developed as people develop. Values entail beliefs about religion, politics, moral standards, race and occupation (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2008).

(c) Environmental Factors

Environmental factors are important shapers of public opinion. They form a crucial part of development of public opinion and behavioural attitudes. Environmental factors which influence public opinion the most include: family, peer group, school, religious place of worship and place of work. People are usually reformed in attitude along with those of their social groups or peers (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2008). One important environmental factor that influences peoples' view is economic factors. It is assumed that during hard economic periods public generosity of the privileged to fellow citizens is enhanced (Yarborough, 2008). This proposition, however, has been found not to be always true (Gillens, 1999). Also, political factors are important force of influence on formation of public opinion. For instance, citizens in multi-party democracies identify themselves with one political party or the other. These political parties

invariably influence the voting behaviour and political attitudes of the people.

(d) Pressure Groups

Pressure groups exert significant influence on formation of public opinions. Pressure groups which includes religious groups and labour unions form and spread opinions on issues of interest to them. Such groups may concern themselves with socio-political and economic issues. They seek to achieve their aims through the use of the mass media, advertising, persuasion and public relation (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2008).

(e) Opinion Leaders

Opinion leaders shape and influence public views and perceptions. They are always abreast of political and public affairs (Zaller, 1992). Since the average citizen is not in the better position to keep abreast of the numerous issues confronting the nation. They therefore, rely on second-hand information which is disseminated by the opinion leaders. This is found to be so because public opinion is better left in the hands of the elites who have the knowledge and the capability to influence the formation and the implementation of public policies (Lipman cited in Moy and Bosch, 2013).

Political Parties

Democratic governance requires active participation of the people in the democratic process. However, in contemporary times, the participation of every citizen directly in the democratic process is not conceivable and cannot be achieved. Thus, there is the need for the existence of democratic institutions and organisations which represent the will, interests, and aspirations of the people. Such democratic institutions and organisations can either be associations, informal groups or non-governmental organisations (Hofmeister and Grabow, 2011). One of such associations which perform representative functions is political parties. Without the existence of viable political parties, representative democracy cannot be achievable. Political parties are endemic to democracy (Stokes, 1999) and they remain part of the viable platforms through which the citizens can actively participate in the democratic process. Thus, they remain one of the most valuable political institutions of modern democracy.

Satori (1976) defines a political party as a group of people organized by an official label that present a common program and compete through election, candidates for public office. A political party has been viewed as an organization with the purpose of attaining governmental power (Heywood, 2002). In addition, political parties are associations in which members join together for the aim of securing power for its leadership and to secure material advantages for its members. A political party as a formal organization whose purpose is to place and maintain candidates alone or in coalition the machinery of government. Shively (1997) sees political parties as groups of officials who are linked with a common program of organization; the chief object of the party is to attain power or are maintained in power. Nwankwo (1990) is an organization with the aim of capturing governmental power and control of political power. A political party aims at capturing power through contests.

From the above definitions, it can be seen that the definitions of political parties are not uniform. Political parties have the aim of contesting for power. A major factor which distinguishes political parties from other organizations is the contests under which they exist. Heywood (1999) distinguishes political parties from other organizations in three ways: first, political parties aim to elect candidates to political office. Second, political parties have card carrying membership. Third, political parties focus on addressing each of the major issues of the day in varying degrees, parties are united by a general ideological identity. It is these three definitions of political parties that are central to the understanding of political parties.

Satori (1976) defines a political party as any political association identified by an official label that presents at elections, and is capable of placing through election, candidates for elective offices. In another perception, political party has been viewed as a group of people organised for the purpose of attaining governmental power most especially through elections (Heywood, 2002). In addition, Weber (1968) perceives political party as associations in which membership is based on free recruitment and have the aim of securing power for its leaders or members in order to attain ideal or material advantages for its members. In his own view, Joseph (1979) views political party as a formal organization whose self-conscious primary purpose is to place and maintain in public office persons who will control alone or in coalition the machinery of government. In another perception, Shively (1997) sees political party as a group of officials or would be officials who are linked with a sizeable group of citizens into an organization; the chief object of this organization is to ensure that its officials attain power or are maintained in power. A political party according to Nwankwo (1990) is an organised group of individuals who have the basic aim of capturing governmental power so as to enjoy the benefits of such control of political power. A common element to all the definitions is that political parties aims at capturing governmental power through electoral contests.

From the above definitions, it can be observed that a common component of the definitions of political party is attainment of political power. All political parties have the aim of contesting for power through elections. This is the major factor which distinguishes political parties from other associations. Political parties also possess unique labels, nomenclature and ideology under which they exist. Heywood (2002) points out four features which distinguish political parties from other groups, these include the following: first, political parties aim to exercise governmental power by winning political office. Second, political parties are organized bodies with a formal card carrying membership. This distinguishes them from broader and more diffuse social movements. Third, parties typically adopt a broad issue of focus addressing each of the major area of government policy. Fourth, in varying degrees, parties are united by shared political preferences and a general ideological identity. It is also important to note that while the definitions of political parties examined above demonstrate some variations in the understanding of political parties, they place much emphasis on taking

part in elections as a means of attaining political power which is their primary aim. For political parties to be able to do this they must meet some certain pre-requisites. Such pre-requisites according to Hofmeister and Grabow (2011:13) include the following:

A party strives to influence the formation of political opinion and aims to have a general political impact. The active influence of political opinion-making is aimed at a longer period of time as well as a wider region and should not be concentrated on a local level or a single issue.

A party is an association of citizens holding individual membership, and shall have a minimum number of members, so that the seriousness of its targets and the prospects of success remain clear.

A party has to demonstrate the will to consistently take part in the political representation of the people during elections. It, therefore, distinguishes itself from unions, non-governmental organisations and other initiatives that do not want to carry any political responsibilities for larger sectors but only try to have selective influence, and that do not participate in elections.

A party has to be an independent and permanent organisation; it shall not be formed only for one election and cease to exist afterwards. It must also be willing to appear in public and does not necessarily need to win a seat in parliament, but it has to fulfil all other criteria (Hofmeister and Grabow, 2011:13).

Functions of Political Parties

In order to be effective in democratic consolidation and to perform some certain functions in a democracy, it is crucial that their satisfactory performance is one of the indices of judging whether a country is a democracy (1962). The basic functions of political parties are limited to the following: articulation of interests, selection, political communication, political education and legitimization.

(a) Articulation and aggregation

Political parties, in a coherent manner, bring together citizens and groups together. They articulate the views of the electorate and groups to the government. Interest articulation means to express the views in clear and unambiguous terms. To aggregate means to collect and balance different and conflicting interests.

(b) Selection

Political parties recruit politicians from different generations of politicians. They select candidates for elections. They recruit people to hold public offices. These members discuss critical issues affecting the country at conferences to mobilize followers. They select people to hold public offices based on the merits of the candidates.

(c) Political Communication

Political communication is the process of conveying information employed by leaders, media, or the public. It is based on the political cognitions, attitudes, and outcomes that bear on the public's political behavior (Perloff, 2014:30). Political parties play a role in effective communication. They disseminate information among party leaders and the public (2005).

Functions of Political Parties

In order to be effective in democratic societies and serve as viable agents of democratic consolidation and advancement, political parties are required to perform some certain functions in the political system. These functions are so crucial that their satisfactory performance has been described as valuable indices of judging whether a country is democratic or not (Schumpeter, 1962). The basic functions of political parties however, include but are not limited to the following: articulation and aggregation of social interest, selection, political communication, political participation and socialization, political education and legitimating.

(a) Articulation and aggregation of social interests

Political parties, in a coherent manner bring all the varying interests of citizens and groups together. They express public expectations and demands of the electorate and groups to the political system. They express issues and views which they feel the general public may not be well informed of. Interest articulation means to express one's concern and curiosity in clear and unambiguous terms. To aggregate interests, on the other hand, means to collect and balance different and often competing interests.

(b) Selection

Political parties recruit political office holders and nurture future generations of politicians. They select persons and present them as candidates for elections. They recruit men of integrity and quality leadership to hold public offices. These members of the parties entrench party ideology, discuss critical issues affecting the society, hold meetings and press conferences to mobilize followers and supporters. These leaders contest and hold public offices based on the trust of the people.

(c) Political Communication

Political communication is the process by which language and symbols employed by leaders, media, or citizens, exert intended or unintended effects on the political cognitions, attitudes, or behaviours of individuals or outcomes that bear on the public policy of a nation, state, or community (Perloff, 2014:30). Political parties serve as an important instrument of effective communication. They are the instruments that regulate the flow of information among party leaders, followers and the electorate (Barney, 2005).

Political socialization is the developmental process through which an individual learn the basic orientation necessary for the maintenance of the democratic system. It provides information about citizenship role, impetus for participant role and awareness of political values. Through this, individuals are inducted into political culture and their democratic orientation takes shape (Gupta, 1975:268). Political parties are very crucial agents of political socialization. They are forums for fostering political participation among the populace. Through enhancing political participation of the people, political parties invariably socialize them. They are the most reliable agents of political socialization.

Parties in any system of government educate, formulate and organize the people. They also help in growing the level of political consciousness of common citizens, who otherwise have no time to peruse and study issues affecting the whole society. Political parties in their effort to come closer to the people organize public rallies, meetings, press conferences on important issues and make their views clear. The common people are made to take cognizance of economic, social, and political condition of the country. Also, the general public are informed about their rights. This provides the common people with an opportunity to analyze the merits and demerits of various important societal issues. This process leads to formulation of public opinion on important issues.

Political parties contribute immensely to the process of legitimising the political system. They establish the connection between the people, social groups and the entire political system. They contribute to maintaining political order in the consciousness of the citizens. Political parties serve as important instruments of winning the support of the majority of the entire citizenry.

Pressure groups are not political parties. Though they perform functions that are closely related to political parties, they are different in terms of their aims and aspirations. They are specific forms of organised civil society. They organise and articulate the various social interests of their members and

Pressure groups have categories such as associational groups. These groups consist of members of the legislature and the executive who have certain objectives in mind. Johari (2011), argues that they have 'output'. He categorizes them into cabinet so as to influence the administrators. It is a part of the organization and they have their own interest.

other social groups and organisations such as labour and trade unions and business associations and organisations. In the process of policy formulation and decision making, pressure groups perform the function of interest articulation and mediation (Hofmeister and Grabow, 2011). A pressure group can be defined as an association or group of people whose main aim and aspiration is to influence government decisions in such a way that they will suit its members interest (Akinbade, 2008). According to Ehrman (1972) pressure groups are voluntary associations of individuals who come together for the achievement of a particular interest. *Interest* in this regard is a conscious desire to have a public policy or the authoritative allocation of values, and to move in a particular, general or specific direction.

Types of Pressure Groups

There is no universal agreement on the classification of pressure groups. This cannot be connected with the imprecise nature of groups and their multiplicity of forms and types (Agbaje, 2000). Nevertheless, some classifications have been offered. Barber (1975) categorizes pressure groups into two namely: *defensive pressure groups* and *promotional pressure groups*. On the one hand, defensive pressure groups are basically concerned with the protection of their members' interests and have a defined membership. On the other hand, promotional pressure groups are concerned with promoting some general public interests as opposed to their own self-interest. Trade or industrial unions, professional associations and human rights associations are in this category otherwise known as functional pressure groups.

Pressure groups have also been classified into four. These include basic categories such as; institutional groups, associational groups, non-associational groups and anomic groups Johari (2011). Institutional pressure groups consist of the three arms of government namely: executive, legislature and the Judiciary. These political institutions aim at achieving certain objectives in the political system. According to Almond cited in Johari (2011), organs of government are capable of creating 'input' they may have 'output'. He cites the example of how the bureaucrats may influence the cabinet so as to take decisions that will serve the interest of the administrators. It is further observed that institutional pressure groups are part of the organizational structure of the society. They can easily harmonize their own interests in the organizational structure of the civil service. For

instance, the ministry of health can influence other bureaucrats on behalf of the government doctors (Alonge, 2005).

Associational pressure groups are pressure groups which have organised body and structure. They are also registered and recognised by the government. Associational pressure groups are guided by laws and regulations which are written in the constitutions of the group. Members of such pressure groups are professionals. Membership is also drawn from other organisations. They struggle to influence government decisions and policies so as to achieve better living conditions for their members. Examples of such pressure groups in Nigeria are: Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC), Nigeria Medical association (NMA) Nigeria Bar Association (NBA) Nigerian Teachers Union (NUT). Associational pressure groups have rigorous and formal procedures for registering new members.

Non-associational pressure groups are not formal organisations. They exist for a particular purpose and once that purpose has been achieved they cease to exist. Non-associational pressure groups are brought together by kinship, family ties, religion, tribal affiliation as well as culture and tradition. Examples includes: Red Cross Society, Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and Committee for Defence of Human Rights (CDHR). Another type of pressure group is the anomic pressure group. Anomic pressure group is an organisation whose behaviour can be predicted. They act according to the dictate of the moment. They are not guided by formal rules and regulation and they do not have structures and are not recognised by the government. This type of pressure groups are easily organised during violent situation. They are organised when they feel that a particular government decision is not favourable and may have adverse effects on the standard of living and condition of the citizens. Examples of such groups include: demonstrators, mob and rioters. One of the main features of this type of pressure group is that they often emerge spontaneously in response to an issue (Agbaje, 2000).

Methods used by Pressure Groups to achieve their Aims

Pressure groups make use of various means to drive home their demands and achieve their aims. The main methods used by pressure groups to realize their interests include: lobbying, propaganda, strikes and boycott, public and peaceful demonstration as well as riot/violence. Lobbying is an effective way of actualizing the aims of pressure groups. Officials of the groups exert

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influence on public officials that are directly involved in taking decisions on the interests of the group. They go to the extent of sponsoring bills relating to demand to be passed into law so as to achieve their aim. Lobbying also has to do with persuasion. Pressure groups make use of persuasive argument backed up with data to influence those in position of authority to formulate and implement policies in their favour. Pressure groups also make use of the mass media both print and electronic to achieve their demands. They make public announcements on the radio and television and even use handbills so as to persuade or to show why those in power have to accede to their demands.

Furthermore, pressure groups make use of strikes and boycotts to show their grievance and dissatisfaction with policies that do not have positive impact on members. Strikes and boycotts are effective means of forcing government to accede to the demand of members. This means has been used in Nigeria, particularly, by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASSU) and Nigerian Medical Association (NMA) to achieve their aims. Peaceful demonstration is also used by members of pressure groups to achieve their aims and realize their interests. This method has been used successfully by pressure groups in Nigeria. An example is the peaceful demonstration organised by the Nigerian Labour Congress to protest the proposed increase in pump price of fuel in 2005. Pressure groups also make use of riots and violence to realize their interests. This is not, however, utilized until after all other methods have failed. Such violence can take several forms including arson and destruction of properties.

Conclusion

The concept of public opinion is central to the study of political behaviour just like the concept of political party. Despite having different meanings and aims, the two concepts are close related in the sense that they both have the objective of bringing about political change. Some pressure groups can be regarded as pseudo political parties considering the scope of focus, also some political parties are quasi pressure groups considering their narrow scope of focus. Public opinion examines popular contentment with issues and policies that are of national importance. Most studies on public opinion assume that there is a strong relationship between public opinion and public policy. Political parties serve as an important forum through which citizens participate in politics and electoral process. It has even been contended that

democracy is not thinkable and visible without the existence of viable political parties. This notion is largely driven by the important functions political parties perform in democratic systems. In relation to party system, it is argued that one party system is inimical to democracy. Two-party system even though recognizes the existence of two parties has a tendency of degenerating into one party system. Lastly, a pressure group is an important association but it is apolitical given the fact that it does not seek to capture political power.

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