15 Social psychology and political behaviour

MARTIN ROSEMA AND BERT N. BAKKER

Introduction

The application of social psychology to the study of politics is at the heart of the discipline called political psychology. Political psychology has been defined as the 'application of what is known about human psychology to the study of politics' (Sears, Huddy & Jervis, 2003, p. 3). Social psychology has been a more influential source of inspiration for the study of politics than any other subfield of psychology. Indeed, insights from social psychology have been of paramount importance in the study of both political elites and mass political behaviour. The many topics that have thus been studied include political socialization, public opinion, voting behaviour, collective political action, ideology, prejudice, political campaigns, presidential performance, policy making, conflict resolution, terrorism and genocide (see Jost & Sidanius, 2004). Several insights about these topics have been used in attempts to change

political attitudes and political behaviour that are considered undesirable, such as racial prejudice, low voter turnout and political violence.

In this chapter we focus on three topics that have been central to political psychology: political leadership, voting behaviour and ideology. We discuss how different types of psychological studies have contributed to understanding these crucial aspects of politics. The field of political psychology comprises at least four different types of studies. First, some psychological studies are not directly about politics but contribute significantly to our understanding of political processes. A well-known example is Milgram's (1974) study on obedience. Asking subjects to deliver high-voltage electric shocks to other people in a learning experiment has little to do with politics per se. But the underlying principles that are uncovered – that most people obey when asked by an authority (in this case, the experimenter) – are crucial to understanding political behaviour, such as the loyalty of civil servants to their political leaders. These insights contribute, for example, to understanding how the tragedy of the Holocaust could have occurred.

The second type of research concerns studies by psychologists who select political topics as object of their research. An example that we discuss below is Ajzen and Fishbein's (1980) work on the theory of reasoned action. When applying their theory, one of the topics they focused on was voting behaviour. Ajzen and Fishbein's aim was not to explain political phenomena as such. Politics was but one of many areas in which they could test their theory. So their work nicely illustrates the second type: psychological theories that are applied to politics, but that are not primarily concerned with explaining political phenomena in particular.

Studies that focus on political phenomena but that can also be applied outside the field of politics constitute the third type. A good example is the work on motivated reasoning in politics,

which suggests that people align new information with their prior attitudes (Taber and Lodge, 2006). Although the theory is formulated in terms of political concerns, the same psychological processes occur outside of politics.

The fourth type of research in political psychology is 'truly' political, which means that the work addresses the political sphere and has no meaning outside of this context. Research on the relationship between values and ideology nicely fits this category. Ideological labels like 'left' and 'right' are inherently political concepts. This implies that political psychology is more than the mere application of general insights from psychology to the field of politics. Political psychology is also concerned with developing theories that specifically and solely address political phenomena.

We now discuss how studies of the second, third and fourth types have contributed to our understanding of political leadership, voting behaviour and ideology (Figure 13.1). We omit research on the first type because there is far too much of it to cover and the research as such is not about politics. For more extensive reviews, which address many additional topics, we refer to the suggested readings at the end of this chapter.

Political leadership

In history individual political leaders have made great differences. Although it is impossible to predict with certainty what would have happened if other people would have occupied the highest positions, there are good reasons to assume that things would have gone differently. One example is the role of Mikhail Gorbachev in the transformation of the Soviet Union, leading to the end of the Cold War and the abolition of the communist regime. Among the many factors that probably contributed to his policies of perestroika (economic and governmental reform) and glasnost (openness) was his personality. He was presumably more

open to new experiences, less likely to conform to others, and more willing to take risks. In light of this, several questions arise: how should the personalities of political leaders be conceptualized, how can their personality be measured, and when and how does leader personality affect behaviour in office? And once such questions are answered, can insights reached then help in selecting the best leaders? These questions have been central in political psychology. There are also many other psychological aspects of leadership that have been studied – for instance, the impact of physical attractiveness, height and birth order – but nothing seems to have intrigued scholars as much as leader personality.

'Big Five' personality factors

Let us start with research of the type that applies general psychological theory to the political domain. One approach to studying political leaders is to take general theories of personality and apply them to an individual case. The five factor trait model – also known as the **Big Five** – has become more widely accepted than any other theory of personality. According to this model, personality is comprised of five major dimensions: neuroticism (or emotional stability), extraversion (or energy), agreeableness (or friendliness), openness to new experiences and conscientiousness. Research suggests that political orientation is consistently correlated with two of these dimensions among the mass public as well as political elites. For example, a survey among state legislators in the United States showed that openness to experience is positively related to liberalism and conscientiousness is positively related to conservatism (Dietrich *et al*. 2012).

In psychology it is customary to study individuals' personalities by asking them to complete questionnaires aimed at measuring such traits. However, for assessing the personality of political leaders using self-reports is challenging. Survey questionnaires for political elites

typically have room for only a limited number of items and they are plagued by low response rates. This method is obviously even less well suited to investigate the personalities of dead political leaders, who are often the focus of research interest. Hence, other methods are required. One potential solution is to have other people complete the questionnaires 'for' the politician in question. This is what Rubenzer, Faschingbauer and Ones (2004) did. They assessed the personality of all American presidents on the basis of ratings provided by biographers and others who had closely studied or been in contact with these presidents. After they had determined the personality of each president, Rubenzer *et al.* (2004) examined whether the trait scores were related to job-performance ratings (as judged by prominent historians). Successful presidents compared to average presidents scored higher on openness, extraversion and neuroticism, and lower on agreeableness. Key examples of successful presidents were Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln. Another conclusion is at least as important, namely, that overall correlations were weak and most personality characteristics did *not* correlate with perceived greatness.

Profiling political leaders

A more widely used method to study political leadership is content analysis. Some researchers who employed content analysis focused on biographical sources, in particular passages that related to personality characteristics. Other researchers used content analysis to investigate speeches and interviews. Even if these are not fully written by political leaders themselves, they may still accurately reflect the leaders' characteristics because the leaders themselves select speechwriters, speechwriters 'know' their clients and leaders typically review drafts.

One of those scholars is Winter (1987), who hypothesized that the performance of political leaders depends on the match between leader personality and the needs of society at that time. Winter coded inaugural addresses of American presidents in terms of their motives, especially the achievement, affiliation and **power motive**, while the need of society was determined by analysing cultural documents such as popular novels or children's readers. Winter examined the impact of presidential motive profiles on popularity (indicated by margin of victory in the election) and perceived greatness (indicated by scores awarded by historians). He found that popularity was influenced by the match between motive scores of the president as compared to the society of that time, whereas presidential performance was influenced by leader characteristics, such as power motivation, independent of the match with needs of that time.

Whereas the above studies focused on traits and motives, others adopted a more cognitive approach. The concept of **operational code** refers to leaders' belief systems about the world, such as whether the nature of political life is one of harmony or conflict, whether the future is predictable and can be controlled or not, and how political goals are most effectively pursued. Such beliefs are presumed to influence political action in a predictable way. A study of the operational code of Russian president Vladimir Putin, for example, concluded that Putin would be unlikely to respond emotionally or impulsively, that he would reciprocate 'bad' as well as 'good' behaviour, and that breakdowns in cooperation would be recurring (Dyson, 2001).

Most research on personality and political leadership has focused on American presidents and leaders of authoritarian regimes (e.g., Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union and Iraq). An exception is a study by Kaarbo and Hermann (1998), who studied four European prime ministers: German chancellors Konrad Adenauer (1949–1963) and Helmut Kohl (1982–1998) and British prime ministers Margaret Thatcher (1979–1990) and John Major (1990–1997). They

coded about one hundred press conferences and parliamentary question sessions in terms of five characteristics: conceptual complexity (openness to information), belief that one can control what happens, need for power, need for affiliation, and task orientation (i.e., focusing on solving problems and accomplishing tasks instead of maintaining good relationships). This set of characteristics illustrates that many studies on political leadership compose profiles that combine factors like traits, motives, cognitive orientations and behavioural tendencies.

> The first conclusion of this study was that the four leaders had different leadership styles. Adenauer and Thatcher were crusaders, taking charge and dominating the political system; they shaped, rather than were shaped by, their political environments and took advantage of opportunities to have influence. They interpreted any political constraints more as a nuisance than as limiting what they could do. Kohl is more the strategist, political timing is important and often is determined by the nature of the political context . . . Major was more pragmatic, taking cues from his environment about what needed to be done. He was interested in co-aligning the various important others around him toward a consensus position that would help to solve the problem or deal with the crisis. (Kaarbo & Hermann, 1998, p. 256)

Kaarbo and Hermann examined whether leadership style had an impact on foreign policy making. They argued that crusaders are more likely to opt for extreme, conflict-seeking activities in the international arena. This is indeed what they observed. A clear example is Thatcher's decision to respond with military force to the Argentinian invasion of the Falkland Islands (Malvinas) in 1982.

Crisis decision making

Political leadership presumably matters most in times of crisis. Thatcher's response to the occupation of the Falkland Islands is an example of how leader personality may affect crisis decision making. However, leader personality is not all that matters. Political leaders do not

operate in a vacuum. First, public opinion may influence the course of action that political leaders choose. Second, political leaders do not make their decisions on their own. Presidents and prime ministers are surrounded by ministers, civil servants, political advisors and sometimes military advisors. So to understand crisis decision making by political leaders, we also need insight into the ways in which they deal with public opinion and the group processes in which political leaders are embroiled.

Arguably the most important lesson from research on crisis decision making and the impact of public opinion is that it is easier to mobilize support for aggressive actions than for conciliatory actions. As a result, decision makers are more vulnerable domestically if they take steps towards compromise and accommodation than if they remain in the conflict situation. One of the theories in psychology (and economics) that can help us understand why this is the case is **prospect theory** (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). This theory can be viewed as a response to **expected utility theory**. According to expected utility theory, possible costs and benefits of alternative decisions are multiplied by the likelihood they occur; the option with the 'highest utility' is chosen. According to prospect theory, decisions deviate from expected utility if decision makers are afraid to experience losses and when risk is in the moderate to high range: the decision maker is then willing to take more risk in order to prevent potential losses (see Chapter 7).

This theory has been applied repeatedly to the field of international relations. Because conciliatory actions by political leaders involve the risk of losing public opinion support, loss aversion causes leaders to embrace more conflicting positions than they otherwise would. Other studies have also shown that crisis decision making does not always conform to expected utility

models derived from economic theory; prospect theory helps to explain these deviations (see Box 15.1).

Groupthink

In addition to public opinion, political leaders are also influenced by those who surround them. The most important theory about political leadership and group processes is arguably that of groupthink, which was developed by Janis (1972). He studied several major political events in which the US government apparently made poor decisions (Bay of Pigs invasion, Pearl Harbor attack, escalation of the Vietnam War). Janis concluded that group processes were the key to understanding the poor decision making – later studies, based on new material on those decisions, suggested that Janis had overstated some of the effects in these cases and that personal leadership styles also had mattered.

According to **groupthink theory**, particular circumstances can lead small groups to make poor decisions. These circumstances include ingroup cohesion, isolation from outside influences, directive leadership and stress. Janis (1972) identified several defects in the decision-making process that may result. First, group discussions will be limited to few alternatives (usually two) and initial decisions will not be critically assessed on the basis of new considerations (Figure 15.2). Second, relevant expert information is not actively retrieved and information supporting initial decisions is given the most weight, rather than judging information on its merits. Third, obstacles that might arise when the decision is carried out are not taken care of. Taken together, these processes lead to a situation in which poor decision making is, if not the rule, at least more likely than it needs to be – and certainly more likely than what citizens may expect from their government.

It is interesting to see that the psychological processes involved in groupthink are exactly the opposite of what we observed above concerning personality traits that contributed to the greatness of presidents. The personality factor that had the strongest impact on a successful presidency was openness. And openness is precisely what is lacking in groupthink.

There are at least two lessons that can be learned from Janis's (1972) observations. First, it may be wise to encourage ingroup members as well as others to challenge dominant views. Second, it makes sense to have a 'second round of discussion' after initial agreement has been reached. A telling example of this wisdom is a much-cited statement by Alfred Sloan, former chairman of General Motors, during a business meeting:

> Gentlemen, I take it we are all in complete agreement on the decision here. Then I propose we postpone further discussion of this matter until our next meeting to give ourselves time to develop disagreement and perhaps gain some understanding of what the decision is all about.

Although this may be counter-intuitive, politicians who adopt this approach presumably have better chances of becoming great leaders.

Voting behaviour

Probably the most important ordinary political action of citizens is selecting their representatives by casting a vote in elections. Explaining why people vote the way they do has been an important topic in political psychology. The outcome of electoral research has important implications. To the extent that research reveals citizens to be well informed and paying close attention to politics, one would be more likely to assign citizens far-reaching responsibilities. On the other hand, if citizens turn out to be poorly informed and choose more or less randomly, or on the basis of, say, the physical appearances of the candidates, one would be more pessimistic about prospects for successful democratic governance.

To vote or not to vote?

Politicians and political scientists alike have emphasized that in a democracy it is essential that many citizens participate in elections (Figure 15.3). According to some, mass participation is an essential feature of democracy. Others argue that the democratic ideal may or may not be violated by abstentions, depending on why citizens abstain and whether specific types of citizens abstain in larger numbers than others. The primary worry has been that those who are economically less well-off abstain from voting relatively often, and consequently their interests are not taken into account by politicians as seriously as the interests of people who do vote (or contribute to political campaigns). This would violate the democratic principle that each individual should have equal influence. High levels of turnout may decrease such worrisome effects.

The decision to vote or not to vote has been studied by social psychologists, political scientists, as well as economists. The primary reason that economists are interested in this topic is that voting behaviour poses a major challenge to rational choice theory: it would predict that citizens will just not bother to vote, because the chance that an individual vote will make a difference is virtually zero, and thus abstain. In reality, however, many citizens do vote. Quattrone and Tversky (1988) contrasted economic and psychological approaches and concluded that the latter clearly provides more insight into the reasons underlying the decision to vote, because voters do not base their decisions to vote on expected utility. The main reason why people go to the polls is that they conceive of it as a civic duty. It is the presence of social norms, rather than influence on the election outcome, that drives the casting of a vote. So, the decision to vote is an excellent example of an act that is poorly understood on the basis of economic decision-making models, and social psychologists can contribute to its understanding.

Considering the importance assigned to electoral participation, it is no surprise that scholars have studied various means of increasing turnout. One example is a field experiment about the impact of personal appeals to voters shortly before the election – a strategy adopted by governments and other organizations (see Box 15.2 and Figure 15.4). However, research indicates that the effect of such interventions is limited.

Theory of reasoned action

Let us now focus on the choices of those who do cast a vote. Why do people support a particular party or candidate? To answer this question, one research strategy would be to apply general psychological theories and make use of concepts that are central in social psychology. Few social psychologists would contest that attitudes are a fundamental concept (McGuire, 1985). What is more central to what you are than what you like and what you dislike? Furthermore, likes and dislikes strongly influence the decisions people make. Considering their central position in social psychology, it is no surprise that attitude-behaviour models have been applied to elections.

Ajzen and Fishbein (1980) developed the most influential theory about attitudes and behaviour: the **theory of reasoned action**, which in a slightly modified version is known as the theory of planned behaviour (see Chapter 2). According to the theory of reasoned action, the direct determinant of behaviour is the intention to perform that behaviour. An intention results from the combination of a person's evaluation of the consequences of the behaviour and the extent to which an individual complies with subjective norms. Ajzen and Fishbein applied their theory to several actions, including voting in a US presidential election, a British parliamentary election and a referendum in Oregon, USA. They concluded that the psychological processes in these elections were identical: salient beliefs resulted in attitudes towards voting options, which

fairly accurately predicted voting intentions and hence vote choice (social influence was not very important). The content of the beliefs, however, differed. In the American case, beliefs about policy outcomes were important (e.g. opinions about defence budget, unemployment, tax reform and health care), whereas in Britain salient beliefs concerned the probability that voting for a particular candidate would increase the chances of a certain government (e.g. a Labour government, a Conservative government, or a particular coalition).

Studies of voting on the basis of attitude-behaviour models have yielded valuable insights. For example, the distinction between attitudes towards objects (parties) and attitudes towards behaviour (voting for those parties), provides an excellent basis to study 'strategic voting', such as voting for a non-preferred party because the preferred party has no chance of winning the seat. However, in mainstream electoral research attitude-behaviour models have had very little influence. Electoral researchers have not been impressed by the conclusion that citizens vote for particular candidates because this helps to get their party into government. Such findings are considered tautological. Furthermore, theories such as the theory of reasoned action do not specify which beliefs determine attitudes towards parties and candidates (e.g., beliefs about economic conditions, policy positions or personal character?) and why beliefs are evaluated positively or negatively (e.g. why is one person in favour of tax cuts but another person against?). Consequently, attitude-behaviour models do not provide answers to the kind of questions that electoral researchers would like to see answered.

The Michigan model of voting

The most important theory about voting behaviour that does identify the kind of attitudes that influence vote choice, as well as their origins, was developed by Campbell, Converse, Miller and Stokes (1960) from the University of Michigan. Their starting point was similar to that of

attitude-behaviour models: political objects, such as candidates and issues, are not simply perceived, but evaluated as well. According to the **Michigan model**, the resulting orientations, whether positive or negative, comprise a system of forces that direct voters towards (the candidate of) one of the political parties.

Campbell *et al.* (1960) focused on the American context and distinguished six such forces, so-called **partisan attitudes**. These concerned personal attributes of the Democratic candidate, personal attributes of the Republican candidate, issues of domestic policy, issues of foreign policy, memberships of social groups, and parties' records in government management. These attitudes were influenced by voters' **party identification**: identification with one of the two major political parties that had been established in early adulthood through family influence and that was reinforced through group memberships (see Figure 15.6). Party identification could directly influence vote choice, but primarily did so indirectly, through its impact on partisan attitudes. Because party identification appeared to be rather stable – albeit this has been questioned by other researchers – the model made it possible to distinguish between long-term and short-term factors. Party identification has remained an important factor and is still a central concept in American voting research.

The concept of partisan attitudes differs from the concept of attitudes as commonly used in social psychology. Generally, attitudes are conceptualized as positions on a single dimension that ranges from very positive to very negative; they refer to liking or disliking certain things (but see McGuire, 1985, for a broader view). Partisan attitudes are positions on a dimension that ranges from, in the US context, strongly pro-Republican to strongly pro-Democratic. Furthermore, the partisan attitudes identified were not regarded as an accurate description of how the voter's mind is organized. The distinction was made for analytical purposes only, enabling

the assessment of the impact of factors like candidate images and salient issues (Figure 15.7). Hence, the Michigan model is psychological in the sense that its explanation of voting behaviour is based on the information in voters' minds. However, it is not very psychological in the sense that it describes specific mental processes that underlie voting or that the concepts used are psychological entities.

The studies on voting by Campbell and his colleagues have inspired many. Comparable studies have been conducted outside the United States, especially in Western Europe, on the basis of national election surveys (e.g. Britain, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands). In some instances, scholars from these countries were enthusiastic about the explanatory power of the Michigan model, whereas other scholars have questioned its usefulness outside the United States (Thomassen & Rosema, 2009). One difficulty is that it is hard to apply the measures in multi-party systems. The most serious doubts, however, concern the concept of party identification: in some countries it appears impossible to distinguish between party identification and vote choice and the presumed stability of party identification was questioned. Consequently, in Europe it appears not possible to distinguish between long-term and short-term forces on the basis of the Michigan model and the theory then loses its appeal. This shows that theories developed in one context cannot always be successfully applied to another context.

Motivated political reasoning

An important contribution of the Michigan model of voting is that it provides an explanation for the stability of electoral behaviour. Further insight into the underlying psychological process has been offered by the theory of motivated political reasoning, which explains how affect and cognition interact and lead to biased information processing (Taber and Lodge, 2006). Specifically, when exposed to new information a series of automatic mental

processes occur. First, individuals categorize new information using already present information. The **hot-cognition hypothesis** predicts that all previous thoughts are affectively charged and stored as such in long-term memory. Consequently, feelings of positive and negative affect emerge after this categorization process. The theory of **motivated reasoning** posits that these hot-cognitions drive the processing of new information. Motivated reasoning is thus best characterised as a process in which prior attitudes shape the interpretation of new information.

Taber and Lodge (2006) identified three mechanisms which lead to the biased processing of new information. The **disconfirmation bias** suggests that citizens put in more effort to generate counter arguments, while they have a tendency to uncritically accept information that is congruent with existing attitudes. The **confirmation bias** holds that citizens will seek information that confirms and is consistent with prior attitudes compared to information that disconfirms prior attitudes. Lastly, the **prior-attitude effect** advocates that citizens with strong attitudes evaluate congruent arguments as being stronger and more convincing. These three mechanisms underlie motivated reasoning and cause citizens' attitudes to become more extreme. This process of attitude polarization is so strong that it occurs even when citizens are presented with a balanced set of statements in favour and against a certain argument. Only in specific circumstances, like when information that is at odds with prior attitudes is repeatedly presented, voters will update their evaluations in line with new information (Box 15.3).

The theory of motivated reasoning is a good example of how political psychologists can contribute and expand social psychological theories. The theory of motivated political reasoning can be generalized to other fields of research. For example, these processes may explain why consumers stay loyal to their favourite brand even if they receive negative information about it.

Ideology

Political attitudes are often studied in isolation. Some researchers focus on evaluations of political candidates, whereas others focus on racial attitudes. Some are interested in public opinion about capital punishment, whereas others explore how citizens think about foreign policy. One may expect, however, that all of these political attitudes are at least somewhat correlated. A central question in political psychology has been in which ways, and to what extent, such correlations exist. Are people's attitudes towards policies coherently structured, for example, in terms of ideological orientations such as left and right? Other hotly debated questions have been whether, and in what ways, the ideological orientations of the public at large have shifted across time (have European citizens become more right-wing in the past two decades?) and whether ideology is still at all important today.

Does ideology (still) exist?

In a classic paper, Converse (1964) argued that one may expect that opinions about individual issues are related to each other. The constraint between individual issue positions results from a person's underlying ideological position. For example, a person who is liberal on one issue is supposed to be liberal on another issue as well.

Converse's (1964) empirical analyses, however, suggested that only about ten per cent of the American electorate used ideological concepts, such as liberalism and conservatism or capitalism and socialism, to structure their opinions. Moreover, many individuals held beliefs that were not consistent. For example, they favoured reducing taxes and at the same time favoured increasing public spending. Another finding was that individuals' positions on issues were rather unstable over time. Converse concluded that although respondents generally politely answered questions about such issues, these did not reveal stable, well-founded opinions on

those issues and social scientists were thus studying **nonattitudes** (apparent attitudes that have little meaning in the world outside the interview). Many scholars who have studied belief systems since then have come to similar, not very optimistic, conclusions about the political sophistication of the electorate.

Although it is certainly true that citizens' attitudes can be inconsistent and instable, the image is not as bleak as sometimes suggested. Negative conclusions about the lack of attitude consistency have partly resulted from methodological weaknesses. For example, in some studies the correlation between party identification and policy preferences were low because they were measured in very different ways. The correlation increased substantially when scholars used similar measures for both concepts. Furthermore, although perhaps few voters are well informed about all topics, many are reasonably well informed about a subset.

More recently, new light has been shed on the nature and relevance of ideological differences. Using a plethora of different methodologies from other disciplines psychologists and political scientists found consistent evidence that there are meaningful and hard-wired differences between liberals and conservatives (Funk *et al*., 2013). In one experiment participants were required to make a motor response or inhibit a motor response. Liberals and conservatives differed in their general neurocognitive functioning: liberals compared to conservatives had more neural activity when they were required to inhibit motor responses. Others showed that political attitudes correlate with physiological traits, whereby conservatives were more likely to show higher physiological reactivity compared to liberals in response to threatening stimuli. These recent advances suggest that ideology has not come to an end and given the deep roots they have one may wonder if it ever will.

Ideology and values

Although ideology is mostly studied without reference to the social-psychological concept of values, both concepts are clearly related. The most influential work on **values** is probably that by Rokeach (1973). His aim was to identify all major values across human cultures. Individuals' value orientations were assessed by asking them to indicate which from a list of values they personally considered most important. Rokeach argued that two of the values identified are closely related to left/right ideology, namely equality and freedom. Combining the importance assigned to equality (low vs. high) and the importance assigned to freedom (low vs. high) results in a two-dimensional space with four categories that match four ideologies: socialism (high equality, high freedom), communism (high equality, low freedom), capitalism (low equality, high freedom), and fascism (low equality, low freedom). Rokeach argued that if in a society virtually all assign high importance to one or both values, ideology becomes a one-dimensional concept. This nicely links up with the way ideology is often seen today, namely as a continuum with left and right (Europe) or liberal and conservative (United States) as opposite poles.

The concept of values is also central to Inglehart's (1997) work on materialism and **postmaterialism**. Inglehart argued that generational conflicts arise not (only) in terms of the left/right division, but also in terms of 'materialism' and 'postmaterialism'. He posited that how much importance a person assigns to a particular value will depend upon, among other factors, the scarcity of goods required to satisfy needs. Things that are taken for granted will not be valued as highly as things that are scarce and would satisfy unmet needs. It is not difficult to see that Inglehart was inspired by Maslow's theory, which posits that needs can be ordered as a hierarchy and individuals will only seek to satisfy particular needs if more basic needs have to

some extent been satisfied. Inglehart pointed out that once a basic character has been formed in childhood and youth, the person will retain the value hierarchy established throughout adult life.

These premises led Inglehart (1997) to hypothesize that across generations different value orientations can be observed. Those raised in times of economic hardship more strongly desire the fulfilment of needs like security and wealth. Inglehart referred to the values that are assigned relatively high importance by recent generations as postmaterialist. These values include freedom of speech and participating in decision making as opposed to fighting price increases and maintaining order. This generational change, according to Inglehart, would be reflected in support for political parties and policies.

Empirical analyses have shown that across generations differences in value orientations have indeed occurred. Furthermore, value orientations are correlated with political preferences and vote choice. Green parties provide a clear example: they draw their support in relatively large numbers from voters who assign high importance to postmaterialist values. Inglehart's conclusions have, however, not remained uncontested. Several researchers have argued that value change comprises more dimensions than the one identified by Inglehart. Furthermore, the contrast between postmaterialism and materialism has not become as important as that between left and right. Issues related to the latter ideological positions have remained of paramount importance for understanding political behaviour.

Prejudice

Ideological orientations also play an important role in prejudice. This applies in particular to the ideological orientation known as right-wing authoritarianism (Stenner, 2005). Another related measure that correlates with prejudice is **social dominance orientation**, which concerns

whether a person prefers relations between ingroups and outgroups to be equal or hierarchical (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

Whereas right-wing authoritarianism and social dominance orientation have mostly been viewed as personality variables, Duckitt (2006) argued that both scales are more appropriately viewed as measuring ideological belief dimensions, which are correlated with conservatism (see also Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski & Sulloway, 2003). Whereas right-wing authoritarianism is related to social conservatism, social dominance orientation is related to economic conservatism. Duckitt identified two world-views that supposedly underlie both orientations: authoritarianism is a response to a view of the world as dangerous, unpredictable and threatening, whereas social dominance orientation is a response to a view of the world as a 'ruthlessly competitive jungle' in which the strong win and the weak lose. He furthermore argued that these world-views are influenced by personality as well as social situations. For example, facing a threat will induce the world-view of a dangerous world and hence authoritarianism. This explains why authoritarianism and social dominance orientation measures are responsive to threat manipulations in experiments. So, citizens who view the world as a dangerous place are more likely to have negative attitudes towards immigrants when they were living in a neighbourhood with a high percentage of immigrants. Considering the fact that social situations can be more easily manipulated than personality, this gives hope to those who wish to fight prejudice by means of interventions based on social psychology.

Applied social psychology in context

The topics discussed in the preceding paragraphs have not received attention in social psychology alone. Political leadership, for example, has also been studied by psychoanalysts and historians. Particularly when studying leaders from the past, taking into account the context, as

historians do, can be highly relevant. In the field of voting behaviour, major contributions have been made in particular by sociologists (focusing on the influence of the social context) and economists (focusing on the decision-making process). Although psychological, sociological and economic models are frequently put forward as competing theories in this field, it would be more accurate to admit that each tells a part of the story. A question that has remained largely unanswered is how exactly these 'parts' relate to each other. Integrating sociological and economic models with psychological research is an important challenge. Self-evidently, political leadership, voting behaviour and ideology have also been extensively studied by political scientists. One challenge they face is to identify not only how social psychology can contribute to understanding politics, but also how insights reached in political science can contribute to social psychology.

When it comes to interventions, such as those aimed at increasing voter turnout, the contribution of social psychology has been modest. Although some measures that can be employed to increase turnout have been identified (see Box 15.2), the impact of the institutional context appears to be much stronger. Cross-national research by political scientists has identified several institutional factors that affect turnout, such as the day of voting (Sunday voting increases turnout) and the electoral system (the 'winner-takes-all' system, as used in Britain, decreases turnout). Not surprisingly, the single most important factor is compulsory voting. Countries in which voting is compulsory, like Australia or Belgium, have much higher levels of turnout than countries in which voting is not obligatory. So those who consider low levels of turnout a problem are more likely to promote institutional changes than interventions studied and proposed by social psychologists.

Another problem with interventions in the field of politics is that there is seldom consensus regarding the aims. Whereas in many areas most people would agree what is desirable and what is not (e.g., few vs. many traffic accidents, clean vs. polluted environment, and so on), in politics virtually all matters are value laden and involve complex trade-offs. What one politician or citizen considers desirable another may consider undesirable. From this perspective, influencing the decisions made by political leaders or voters would often be considered unethical (see Chapter 1). Consequently, political interventions by social scientists are more rare than interventions in some other areas of applied social psychology.

Conclusion

Social psychology has contributed to the study of politics not so much by developing intervention strategies, but by increasing our understanding of politics in many areas. Our review of studies in political psychology also tells us something about the usefulness of the types of studies that we distinguished in the introduction. When studying political leadership as well as voting behaviour, we identified general social-psychological theories that have been applied in these domains. Although such studies have resulted in several insights, their contribution to understanding political phenomena is clearly limited. Big Five ratings are related to political orientation and presidential performance, for example, but not very strongly. The theory of reasoned action has been applied to voting behaviour, but it cannot really specify in advance which attitudes will influence vote choice, nor explain why particular attitudes are held.

Studies in political psychology that have been more successful, at least in terms of how often they have been cited in research on politics, concern specific political phenomena. In electoral research, for example, the most important psychological theories explicitly concern

vote choice and ideological commitment. This is not to say that the psychological processes involved in, say, voting behaviour differ qualitatively from behaviour in other areas of life. If that had been the case, social psychology would not have been such a rich source of inspiration for those who study political behaviour. But applying social psychology to politics apparently requires some fine tuning. This is one important reason why political psychology remains such a fascinating albeit challenging field of study.

Acknowledgement

Glossary

Authoritarianism: personality type that leads to ingroup glorification and prejudice against outgroups

Big Five: theory that posits that personality consists of five traits: neuroticism, extraversion, agreeableness, openness to experiences and conscientiousness.

Confirmation bias: actively seeking of information that confirms prior attitudes

Disconfirmation bias: generating counter arguments when information contradicts prior attitudes, while uncritically accepting information congruent with prior attitudes.

Expected utility theory: theory that posits that possible costs and benefits of alternative choice options are multiplied by the likelihood they occur and that the option with the best net result is chosen.

Groupthink theory: theory that posits that ingroup cohesion, isolation from outside influences, directive leadership and stress lead small groups to make poor decisions.

Hot-cognition hypothesis: hypothesis that states that all information in long-term memory is stored with emotional evaluations attached, which come to mind when the information is recovered from memory.

Michigan model: theory that posits that vote choice is determined by voters' party identification, through its impact on attitudes towards candidates, policies, group benefits and government performance.

Motivated reasoning: theory which holds that citizens will process information in a biased manner so that it aligns with prior attitudes and leads to attitude polarization.

Nonattitudes: apparent attitudes expressed by respondents in survey questions that do not reveal any opinion relevant outside the context of the research.

Operational code: political leader's belief system about the world, in particular whether political life is one of harmony or conflict, whether the future is predictable and how political goals are most effectively pursued.

Partisan attitudes: psychological forces that direct voters towards a particular political party; these forces are the direct determinants of voting behaviour in the Michigan model.

Party identification: identification with a particular political party that voters develop early in their life, which influences their voting behaviour both directly and indirectly through its impact on political attitudes.

Prior-attitude effect: attitude congruent arguments are evaluated as being more convincing.

Postmaterialism: value orientation that emphasizes self-expression and quality of life over economic and physical security.

Power motive: the need of an individual (e.g., a politician) consciously or unconsciously to influence other people and let them do things they otherwise would not have done.

Prospect theory: theory that posits that decisions deviate from expected utility outcome, in particular because decision makers are willing to take risks to prevent losses.

Social dominance orientation: personality characteristic that concerns whether a person prefers relations between ingroups and outgroups to be equal or hierarchical.

Theory of reasoned action: theory that posits that behaviour is directly determined by an intention, which is formed on the basis of a personal assessment of the consequences of the behaviour and the compliance with subjective norms.

Values: desirable trans-situational goals that vary in importance and serve as guiding principles in one's life.

Review questions

1. In this chapter we have distinguished four types of studies in political psychology. List these four types and provide one example of each.

2. What are the personality characteristics of *your* ideal leader? Do you expect other people to agree?

3. Is there any social-psychological theory that has been discussed in one of the preceding chapters that in your view could well be applied to explain mass political behaviour, for example, voting?

4. How are values and ideology related?

5. Is it appropriate for social psychologists to intervene in political processes in order to manage 'social problems'?

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Box 15.1   Prospect theory and the Cuban missile crisis

The Cuban missile crisis in 1962 was arguably the most dangerous period in world history. In spring of 1962 the Soviet Union's leader, Nikita Khrushchev, decided to send nuclear missiles to Cuba. If the operation had succeeded, it would presumably have prevented any possible attack by the United States on Cuba and would have strengthened Khrushchev's leadership position, both domestically and internationally. Apart from these considerable potential benefits, there were huge potential costs: the risk of a devastating war or, if forced to retreat, a weakened leadership position. US president John Kennedy found out about the missiles and decided to respond by blockading Cuba and giving Khrushchev an ultimatum to return the missiles. For Kennedy, the possible gains were obvious and great (restored American credibility, no missiles in Cuba), but so were the possible costs: if the Soviet Union refused to capitulate, war was the most likely result. Initially Khrushchev appeared willing to defy the blockade, but he eventually decided to retreat.

Haas (2001) examined whether the decisions by both leaders could be understood on the basis of expected utility theory and prospect theory. On the basis of information from

Soviet archives and transcripts of secretly taped meetings of American officials, he determined the anticipated benefits, costs and probabilities of success. Haas concluded that Kennedy's decision to implement a blockade and Khrushchev's subsequent decision to withdraw the missiles could be explained on the basis of expected utility theory, as the chosen options were characterized by strong potential benefits and a high likelihood of success. However, Khrushchev's most crucial decision, namely, to send nuclear missiles to Cuba, could not. Whereas the possible benefits and costs of the whole operation were both very high, the perceived likelihood of success was low. Prospect theory, however, provides an explanation: the loss frame (a focus on the likely loss of Cuba and threats to domestic political goals) made Khrushchev willing to take more risk. Haas also identified two other decisions that conformed to expectations derived from prospect theory but not expected utility theory: Kennedy's decision to continue to threaten the Soviet Union after the blockade had been established and Khrushchev's decision to pretend to defy the blockade initially. The potential costs were in both cases very high (war with the other country) and the estimated likelihood of success low, but to prevent potential losses the leaders were willing to take these risks.

Box 15.2   Effects of personal appeals on voter turnout

Earlier studies on voter mobilization showed that contacting voters has small effects on turnout. Social networks, like Facebook, make it possible for every individual to reach large groups with limited effort. In order to examine the impact of online social networks on voter turnout Bond *et al.*, (2012) conducted an experiment with American Facebook users who visited Facebook on the day of the US congressional election of 2010. In the 'social message' condition participants received a button on top of their News Feed stating 'I Voted' accompanied by the number of

Facebook users that had already voted. Moreover, the pictures of up to six Facebook friends who had indicated that they had voted appeared next to the button (Figure 15.5). In the 'information message' condition participants received the same 'I voted' button but without the pictures of the Facebook friends, whereas the control group did not receive any information

The results of the experiment confirmed that users receiving the social message including pictures of their friends next to the 'I voted' button were 2% more likely to push the 'I voted' button compared to the users in the 'information message' condition. Upon receiving the social message users were also more likely to search for polling information than users that received the informational message. Actual turnout was determined on the basis of public records. The findings revealed that users receiving the social message were .39% more likely to vote compared to the other condition. Furthermore, the likelihood to vote did not differ between the users receiving the information message and the control group. These results confirm that a social message leads individuals to express that they had voted, look for more information and actually increase the likelihood to vote.

Box 15.3   The dynamic information board

According to Redlawsk, Civettini, and Emmerson (2010), the widely used survey questionnaires are ill suited to study the mental processes of voters. Instead they used an alternative method: the **dynamic information board**. This is a computer program that imitates the process of an election campaign in an experimental setting. Participants registered as either Democrat or Republican have to vote in an imaginary primary election of their

party. Before voting they have to inform themselves about the competing candidates during the experiment. The computer screen continually presents several scrolling headings, which reveal information when clicked by the participant. The information board thus enables participants to select information about socio-demographic characteristics and policy preferences. The researchers experimentally manipulated the extent to which participants receive positive or negative information about the preferred candidate.

The theory of motivated reasoning predicts that participants will be motivated to disconfirm negative information about the preferred candidate. This experiment enabled Redlawsk *et al.* (2010) to test to what extent motivated reasoning can be overcome when participants receive more and more negative information about their preferred candidate. They did this by comparing how evaluations of candidates (measured by asking participants to rate each candidate) changes at different points in the experiment. The analysis confirmed that motivated reasoning can be overcome when participants continuously receive information which is incongruent with their expectations. When this happens, participants adjust their evaluations in line with the received negative information about the candidate. This study thereby nuances the claim that citizens will disconfirm all information that is not in line with their priors. Instead, citizens will update their evaluations if necessary, which suggests that citizens will not always uncritically continue to support a preferred candidate.

Figure 13.5

Source: Bond et al. (2012, p. 296)