

# Contemporary Political Theory

A look beyond the classic  
political theories

# Institutionalism

- Focus of political science from late 19<sup>th</sup> –mid 20<sup>th</sup> century
- Concerned with the formal structures of government
- Reflected influence of law on political science
- Assumed governments worked in practice as articulated on paper
  - Error realized w/ rise of totalitarian gov'ts in 1930s
  - Stalin's Soviet gov't looked like democracy on paper **BUT** dictatorship in practice

# Contemporary Theories

- **Contemporary refers to post World War II**
- **Some people argue that contemporary theories are trivia or simple restatements or repackaging of the classics**
- **Several contemporary theories have made contributions to world thought on politics**
- **No one will argue that contemporary theory is weak compared to classic theory**

# Types of Contemporary Theory

- Behavioralism
- Systems Theory
- Modernization Theory
- Rational-Choice Theory
- New Institutionalism

# Behavioralism

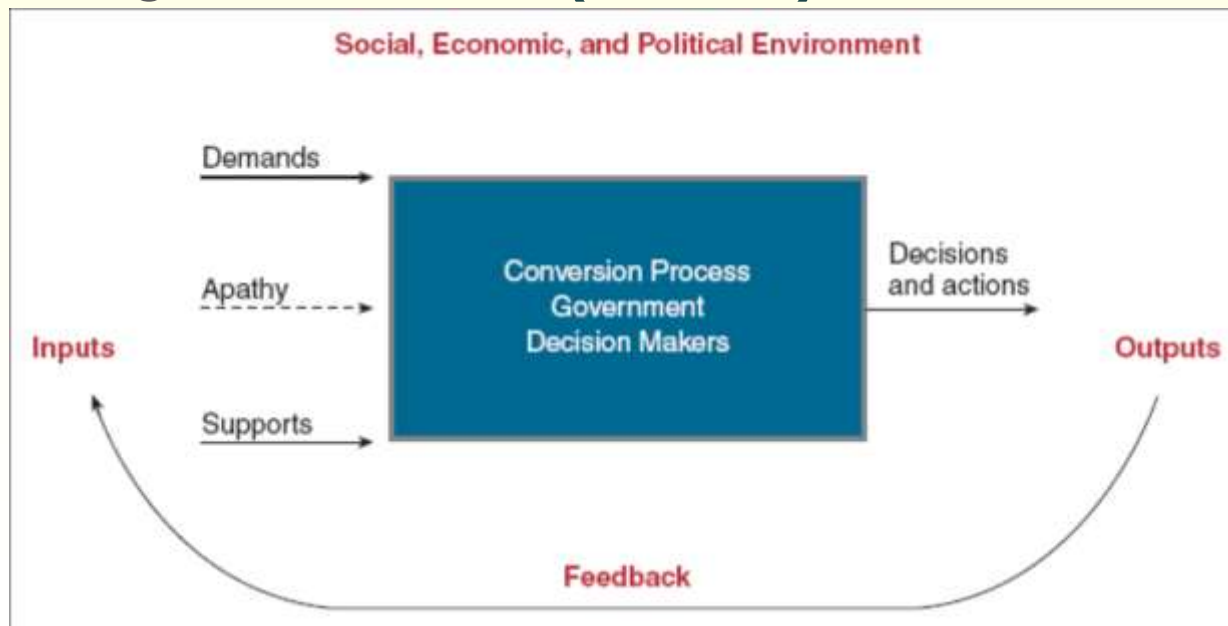
- ❑ Looked at how politics REALLY worked not how it was supposed to work
- ❑ Concentrates on actual behavior, not on thoughts or feelings
- ❑ Built upon Auguste Comte's doctrine of positivism
  - Social phenomena can be scientifically studied like physical phenomena
- ❑ Built empirical basis for political science with numerous quantitative studies, especially on voting
- 👉 Viewed as dealing with minor phenomena, not with more complex qualitative questions, such as decision-making

# Post-Behavioralism

- Claimed behavioralist research was biased towards the status quo and social preservation rather than social change
- Combination of traditional and behavioral approaches
  - Use BOTH qualitative and quantitative data
- Recognized facts & values tied together
- Examine history & institutions, public opinion, and rational choice theory.

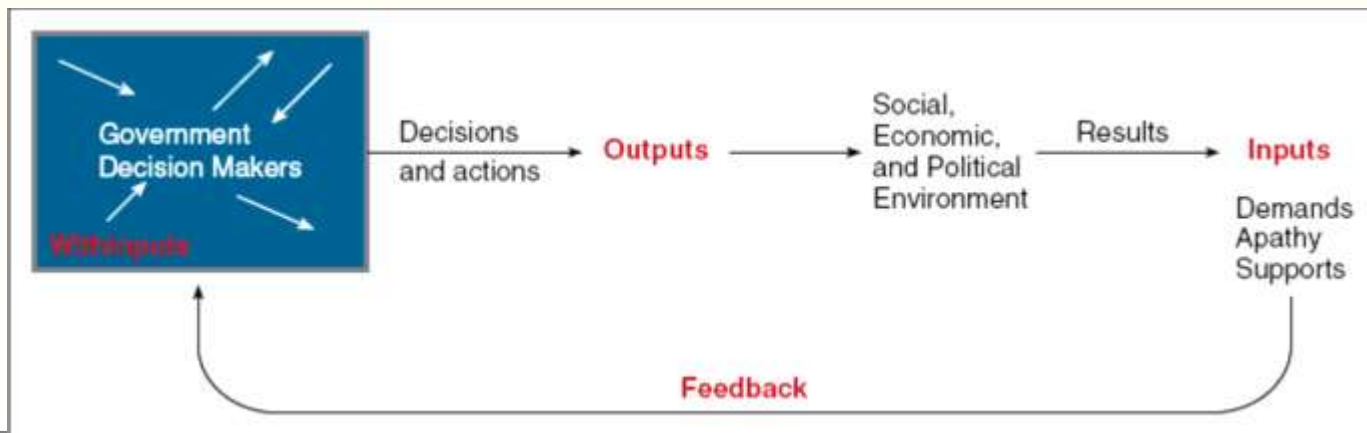
# Systems Theory

- Views political world as a complex and interconnected system
  - an impact on one part affects the other parts
- A country's politics acts as a feedback loop
  - citizens' demands (**INPUTS**) generate government responses (**OUTPUTS**), which then impact the citizens in various ways, creating new demands (**FEEDBACK**)



# Modified Systems Theory

- **Modification accepts the feedback process**
- **Puts “conversion process” of government first**
  - Government originates most decisions, not citizens
  - Much happens within government decision-making process, independent of citizens' wishes, such as interagency competition





# Modernization Theory

- Rooted in Hegel and Marx
  - All facets of society – economic, cultural, political – are a package
- Industrialization critical = as a country develops, its political character develops
- Stability and form of government is determine by economic development
- When states modernize just one facet, they face turmoil
  - Traditional sectors oppose modernity

# Rational-Choice Theory

- Invented by mathematicians, especially popular with economists
- Assumes people are rational actors who maximize their interests, consciously
- Argues a person can generally predict political behaviors by knowing the interests of the actors involved because they rationally chose to maximize their interests
  - Ex: a politician is going to figure out what issues will get him the most votes and this will sway his political agenda and how he votes when elected
- Tends to ignore impact of culture, religion
- Assumes people always act rationally

# New Institutionalism

- Created in the 1970's when people began to reexamine the institutions themselves
- Believes that institutions (agencies, parties, legislatures) develop their own internal culture
  - Government structures take on lives of their own and shape behaviors and attitudes of the people who live and benefit from the institution
- Institutions are not simple the reflection of social forces... THEY ARE THE FORCE
- Preservation of the institution is key for members who control it
  - Thus they conform to the culture of the institution