

## **POLITICAL PSYCHOLOGY**

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### **Summary**

Studies relating psychological variables to political phenomena have a long past. However, only recently has political psychology been institutionalized as an interdisciplinary area of study. In the first part of this article a review of the research and events that contributed to the discipline is presented. This review shows the distinct senses in which this area of knowledge is understood. While from certain positions an individual approach to political phenomena is defended, from other positions there is a compromise with a more collective dimension, more committed to social change. But besides these differences, political psychology is especially relevant to understanding and comprehending several political dynamics. The revision in different areas of this discipline, from authoritarianism, political participation, and social movements to political violence shows clearly the important repertoire of theoretical formulations and concepts available to explain these topics, and to design, where necessary, intervention strategies that will allow for a solution to some of the problems in the area.

## 1. Introduction

For those who are not very familiar with psychology, it could be surprising to find a work area called political psychology. It could be thought that psychology and politics are two spaces of action that have nothing to do with each other. However, we do not need to analyze very much the dynamics of politics to see that there is a series of factors such as perceptions, attitudes, values, and conflicts that constitute the object of interest and study that defines the science of psychology.

This is why G. Le Bon, in his *La Psychologie Politique et La Défense Sociale* (1910), claimed the need to develop a discipline of political psychology, because at that moment there were very few studies concerned with these topics. Also, he was surprised that studies in political science did not include knowledge offered by psychology, which he thought constituted the true foundation of politics.

As can be seen, Le Bon was not only talking about political psychology, he was also forerunner of a debate that would come years later; he reproved political science for its ignorance on these matters.

Previously, other authors had used the label political psychology. The Spanish psychologist E. Luis André, for example, in 1906 published *El Histrionismo Español. Un Ensayo de Psicología Política*, in which he studied the beliefs of the Spanish people, following the current interest in collective mentality.

In any event, it should be clear that we can apply to political psychology the well-known saying that it has a long past but a short history. We say this because there have been some authors and books we could classify in this discipline without any difficulty, even before the term political psychology existed. Without any doubt, one of the clearest examples is Machiavelli, who is cited by Le Bon as the author of the only treatise in political psychology that existed at that time. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli gathered different principles and reflections over how to maintain domination over others and to retain power, all of evident psychological content.

The ideas of Machiavelli are of importance not only because of the interesting reflections on human nature, but also because of the influence they had on later psychopolitical thinking. Good evidence of this is that one of the personality dimensions put forward in the study of political attitudes has been called Machiavellism. In this case dimensions put forward center on three central aspects indicated by the author from Florence: opinions over human nature, strategies to be used in relationships with others, and generalized moral principles.

The list of authors that could be considered as remote intellectual antecedents to the current political psychology could be widen without any difficulty. Simply accounting for the contributions that have related political phenomena with different psychological processes could do this. We could thus include an almost infinite list of authors from times and ideas as different as Protagoras, Durkheim, Rousseau, Montesquieu, Ortega, and Freud.

## 2. First Studies in Political Psychology

The interest in psycho-political issues has been a constant in the history of thinking. But, regardless of these illustrious antecedents, it was not until the 1930s that we could find studies that, with authentic rigor, we could classify as psycho-political. From then on, a series of contributions would be made that would lay the foundations for the later institutionalization of the discipline.

The studies performed by L.L. Thurstone on the measurement of attitudes made possible the development of one of the areas of research that would become classic in political psychology: sociopolitical attitudes. Thurstone himself contributed to the area by applying a questionnaire to 300 students in 1934, and by obtaining, through factorial analysis, two orthogonal factors he denominated radicalism-conservatism and nationalism-internationalism. By that time, Carlson had identified three factors: intelligence (which was positively correlated to political attitudes such as communism and pacifism), radicalism-conservatism, and religiosity.

Another author who significantly contributed to the development of political psychology is H. Lasswell. In fact, an important group of political psychologists refer to him as the father of the discipline. Some of the topics approached by Lasswell are political leadership and power, the relationship between elites and mass, and the mechanisms of influence. In *Psychopathology and Politics*, he analyzed the main characteristics and traits of the political being. In opposition to other explanations of the reasons that motivate political beings to public life, Lasswell stated this kind of person is the result of private motives placed on public objects and rationalized in terms of public interest.

Persuasive communication is another issue in political psychology. With the end of World War II, researchers started to analyze, in a systematic way, the mechanisms that favored persuasion. In this area, C. Hovland and his group at Yale University must be mentioned.

Studies on propaganda efficacy had a noticeable precedent in the classic research area in political psychology of voting behavior. The results obtained by P. Lazarsfeld, B. Berelson, and H. Gaudet's analysis of the electoral campaign conducted in 1940 in Eire County, Ohio, undermined the beliefs of that time regarding the influence of the mass media. This research supported the thesis of limited effects, and opened a very important area of research devoted to the way in which mass media can influence. We will return to this issue later on.

But besides the studies on voter intention, during the 1950s different studies on the subject of political participation were conducted. During that time, the concept of participation was reduced to the most conventional forms, and interest was focused on the analysis of the influence that certain characteristics, such as feelings of political efficacy, have on modalities of political life presence such as voting, meeting participation, and so on.

Political socialization has also been a topic that for a long time was focus of special concern. The reasons are easy to understand. Socialization is the process that permits

the transmission of rules, beliefs, and values in a population. This process was basically understood from the perspective of adaptation and conformity to the surrounding environment.

These are some of the areas of study that eventually helped to create political psychology. An interest in relating psychological knowledge to political phenomena can be seen in all of them.

### **3. The Relationship between Psychology and Politics**

Considering the subject matter of psychology, there should be little doubt regarding the importance of this discipline to the explanation and comprehension of political behavior and phenomena. In fact, political science itself assumed this fact. An important figure in political science, C.E. Merriam, pointed out in his 1925 book *New Aspects of Politics* the need for political science to open up to other disciplines, among which he mentioned psychology. On the same track, W. Lippmann commented in 1923 that political thinking was making a great mistake talking about politics while forgetting about people.

Even though there was a favorable attitude toward incorporating psychological knowledge into the explanation of political behavior, the formalization of this relationship between psychology and political science was not easy. This brings to mind the problem of interdisciplinarity that is so familiar to psychologists in general, and particularly to social psychologists.

Although at the level of discourse it is difficult to deny the advantages of interdisciplinary work, the daily practice shows that this road is not free of difficulties. Some of these difficulties have to do with terminology, conceptual differences, and discrepancies in research objectives that disrupt a fluid relationship. Yet other motives have to do with a struggle to control certain areas of knowledge. But besides that, these difficulties in interdisciplinary collaboration can also come from existing mistrust among these disciplines as to their capacity to approach research problems in an adequate manner.

Multiple obstacles have to be faced by a discipline that, as with political psychology, has a clear interdisciplinary vocation. Fortunately, our area of knowledge has been endowed with forums and debates that allow the ongoing construction, not without difficulties, of ties of ever-growing importance between psychology, political science, and other disciplines interested in the study of political phenomena.

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## Biographical Sketches

**José Manuel Sabucedo** is professor of social psychology and director of the Research Unit of Political Behavior at the University of Santiago de Compostela, Spain. He was dean of the Faculty of Psychology of the University of Santiago de Compostela and member of the governing council of the International Society of Political Psychology. He was chair and organizer of various national and international meetings on social psychology and political psychology. His main lines of investigations are political psychology, social movements, political violence, and nationalism, about which he has published several books and articles with colleagues from different countries.

**Wilson López López** obtained his degree in psychology at the Universidad Incca de Colombia, with a specialization in consumer psychology and this was followed by a master's in socioeconomic planning studies. Editor of the international journals *SUMA Psicológica* and *International Journal of Clinical and Health Psychology*, director of the Research Center at the Fundación Universitaria Konrad Lorenz, he has been lecturer and researcher in the following universities: Los Andes, Javeriana, Católica, Santo Tomas, Sergio Arboleda. He has published two books, four chapters by invitation, and 35 articles in international scientific journals. He has participated in more than 50 international events. He is the president of ABA Colombia and co-chair at the International Development of ABA International Organization. He has obtained several international awards for his research work.