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## David Truman's The Governmental Process: Political Interests and Public Opinion Study Guide

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David Truman, THE GOVERNMENTAL PROCESS: Political Interests and Public Opinion. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1951.

Steve Samson

Thesis: "In all societies of any degree of complexity the individual is less affected directly by society as a whole than differentially through various of its subdivisions, or groups." (15) Truman emphasizes that groups assist in the process of specialization. As society becomes more complex, groups proliferate to meet people's various needs. It is impossible for an individual to function in all of the component groups of even the simplest society. His thesis implies that the individual exchanges the broad compass of a jack of all trades for the security of an accepted place in the community. In fact, the group or community acts as a buffer: "The positions occupied by the individual in his society limit the effects upon him of society as a whole." (16) People are placed in society according to statuses, which are positions based on age, sex, wealth, religion, and so forth.

Groups are more than the setting of people's activities in society. They mediate people's experiences in much the way language and technology do also. "The group experiences and affiliations of an individual are the primary, though not the exclusive, means by which the individual knows, interprets, and reacts to the society in which he exists." (21) This is one of the best thoughts of the book, but the author does not pursue a systematic study of this socialization process. Truman often limits his concern to description. He extends this second thesis to account for individual differences, noting the genetic and environmental sources of individual differences. Behavior and attitudes are products, he believes, of a genetic process that includes the whole of a person's life experiences. This is reminiscent of Jose Ortega y Gasset's motto: "I and I and my circumstances."

#### Outline of Major Themes:

Formal organizations are characteristic of society in general. They grow in significance as society becomes more complex and interdependent. Truman follows Max Weber's lead in emphasizing the stability (or permanence), formality, uniformity, and generality of political institutions. In line with the pluralist view, society is depicted as the interaction of the groups which compose it. Truman notes a logical order of development toward a highly complex society.

First, according to Aristotle, human beings must live in society in order to develop the intellectual and creative talents that distinguish them from other animals. Truman rejects the romantic individualism of a Rousseau which assumes that individuals exist first in some measure of isolation before socialization. He cites Madison's statement that factions, or groups, are "sown in the nature of man." Outside society, as in the case of feral children, intellectual development is stunted and survival threatened.

Second, groups are based on interactions or relationships among individuals, and society is composed of groups. These interactions have a certain character and frequency. They are not based on mere similarities, such as blond hair. The frequency of interaction is the key rather than the

characteristic that is shared. This suggests that the shared characteristics may change over time within the self-same group.

Third, "any society...is a mosaic of overlapping groups of various specialized sorts." (43) It would have been useful for Truman to determine whether there is a dynamic that leads to groups filling all the nooks and crannies of society. If so, is it based on a need to render circumstances more predictable or controllable? It might help account for the tendency of many groups to extend the scope of their activities, for example, when businesses diversify or conglomerate.

Fourth, the attitudes and behavior of group members are formed and guided through habitual patterns of group interaction. The frequency and persistence of such interaction determines its strength.

Fifth, the dynamics of society are determined by the changes and disturbances in these habitual patterns of group interaction. These group patterns are the social institutions. Survival of an institution requires that an equilibrium be worked out along standardized lines to prevent disruption. A group's or society's stability is its tendency to maintain or revert to equilibrium. Truman's model seems to be a primitive cybernetic mechanism. There is even a hint of systems theory when he notes that society is more than the sum of its organized interest groups. But he also takes care to avoid a "metaphysical" explanation. The remainder seems to be made up of "potential interest groups in the 'becoming' stage of activity." (51)

Interest groups are based on one or more shared attitudes and, on this basis, make claims on other groups in society "for the establishment, maintenance, or enhancement of forms of behavior that are implied by the shared attitudes." (33) Their basic objective is "access to one or more key points of decision in the government." (264). One variety of interest group is the association. It grows out of "tangent relations" between established groups, which usually means that their membership tends to overlap. An association of industrialists may develop as a result of demands by a labor union. Its function is to stabilize the relations of individuals in these tangent groups, like a peace conference between former enemies in face of a common foe. Truman spends a large section of the book recounting the historical development of various types of association in this country: labor organizations, trade associations, agricultural groups, and the natural drift of all of these interest groups to seek government intervention. Truman does not detail the reasons for this reliance on government action but notes its consequences, which he says are cumulative. Consistent with laissez faire theory, he contends that such activity disrupts the equilibrium and forces competing interests to try the same. The government is not a neutral observer or force. The claims of different groups carry different weight and they follow different patterns of activity. Access is the key to health in the polity

Truman's concept of morbific politics, which he develops in the final chapter, comes nearest to offering a formula for political health. He uses a medical model and sees revolution and decay as diseases of the body politic. Potential interests play the role of antibodies. "In a domestic crisis the continued latency of these unorganized interests may prevent the development of a viable compromise..." (516), leading to disruption. Some conflict is inevitable, however, due to group multiplici

Critique:

Truman fails to lay out a distinct methodological strategy. He leaves the reader with the fragments of one but together they fail to make a whole. What is lacking is a model of group and individual behavior that can be generalized for prediction. While there are rudiments of such a model, as when Truman distinguishes between various associations, what is missing is some hard data. Even in the absence of statistical data, the boundaries he sets seem too narrow to do otherwise than offer descriptions. The life cycle of groups might have been studied. The process of socialization might have been broken into more basic elements. How do groups defend their boundaries, or adapt to changing circumstances? If a degree of conformity is the price of acceptance, what is the role of the outsider in the group? He does note the tendency toward minority control but does not offer a definite theory to counter Michels', which he rejects. Truman's best defense, however, lies in his work's acceptance. There are few surprises in the book for the very reason that its basic concerns and ideas have been well incorporated into the body of traditional political science literature.

## David Truman The Governmental Process, 1951

### Summary:

1. Thesis statement: "In all societies of any degree of complexity the individual is less affected directly by society as a whole than differentially through various of its subdivisions, or groups." (15)

a. "It is literally impossible (even in the simplest society) for any one individual to function in all (the component groups)." Specialization vs. The Renaissance man or jack of all trades.

b. "The positions occupied by the individual in his society limit the effect upon him of society as a whole." (16) Positions = status = age, sex, class, economic, political, etc. E.g., laws often reflect these statuses. Statuses

~~2. Two extensions of this thesis = act as buffers (e.g., mentally incompetent)~~

a.

2. Modification of the Thesis: "The group experiences and affiliations of an individual are the primary, though not the exclusive, means by which the individual knows, interprets, and reacts to the society in which he exists." (21)

Uniformities of behavior and attitude are reproduced through socialization.

Two extensions to account for individual differences:

a. "No two human organisms are identical in biological functioning and endowment, though their physiological and psychological processes are the same." (22)

b. "Even though the group affiliations of two adults are at a given point in time virtually identical, which is unlikely, their group experiences probably cannot have been identical since birth." (22) Behavior and attitudes are products of a genetic process that includes the whole of their life experience. By implication, an individual cannot be distinguished from his

### Outline:

1. Formal organizations are characteristic of society in general. They grow in signifi-

circumstances (context).

cause as society becomes more complex and interdependent, cf. pluralism.

2. Aristotle - men must live in society in order to manifest these capacities and achievements which distinguish them from the other animals. (e.g., language and technology).

Interdependence vs. individualism:

a. Robinson Crusoe hypothesis - man as isolated unit - is inadequate psychology and unfashionable economics.

b. Feral children and isolated children fail to acquire speech and their capacity to learn is stunted.

c. Physical dependence - family exists in part to provide protection and training for offspring during their long period of helplessness.

3. Theorists who focus on "social contracts", like Rousseau, or "instincts", like Maslow, assume that individuals exist first in some degree of isolation before forming groups. (Not necessarily - isolation may take place in the social setting). With Madison, Truman concludes that factions or groups are "some in the nature of man".

4. Influences on behavior:

a. primary groups (face to face) = family, neighborhood, school, etc. The individual's expectations, values, and skills will differ according to the character of early group experience. Before mass communication, physical proximity was the main determinant of the degree of solidarity in group behavior - e.g., the village. Today, secondary groups are playing a larger role as certain primary groups decline (cf. McLuhan's "global village" of mass communications).

5. A measure of conformity is the price of acceptance.