You're a good citizen, right? You voted in the last election or you're looking forward to voting in the future, you pay your taxes, you're to exercise the full range of your civic responsibilities.

The point is, you might already know all about how your government works. If you don't, and you're American, well there's a Crash Course for that.

But even if you're an informed citizen who knows every line of your constitution by heart that doesn't mean you know why your government works. For that, we need a different kind of political knowledge.

Civics can tell you how your system works, but sociology can help you understand why.

===== Intro (0:30) =====

So, what do we mean when we talk about politics? A civics class can define politics in terms of the particular systems of government. But sociologists have a broader definition.

Politics is the major social institution by which society organizes decision-making and distributes power and resources. By this definition, politics obviously includes things like the government itself. But it also includes things outside of it like political party organizations and lobbying groups and even social movements.

Voting is a political action, but so is going to a demonstration or calling your representative or boycotting the company whose CEO has ideas that you find disagreeable. Because these are all ways of trying to influence societal decision making and the distribution of power.

That being said, the government does have special importance here because it's the major formal organization that organizes and regulates politics, so it's responsible for making decisions for the whole of society.

And it can carry out these decisions because it has a lot of power. Which our old friend, Max Weber defined as the ability to achieve desired ends over the objections of others.

Now, Weber considered a government's power to be coercive power, or power that is backed by the threat of force. You might not think of your government as a threat, but Weber actually defined a state as "the organization that has a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence".

Of course, and thankfully, not every action that a government takes requires an overt use of force. Under normal circumstances, people respect the political systems at work in their government. And they tend to view state power as an expression of authority where state leaders have the right to use legitimate power.

And so, while violence is Weber is always the ultimate last resort of the state, most of the time it isn't necessary. Weber also recognized that the power of a political system comes in a variety of forms.

Traditional Authority is power that's legitimized by respect for long-standing cultural patterns and beliefs. It's based on the same idea as the traditional mindset we talked about in episodes 9 and 17. Namely that the world has a basic order to it and that order must be respected.

Another style of power is known as Rational-Legal Authority. Or power legitimized by legally enacted rules and regulations. This is the power behind the US Constitution, whose written rules determine the entire American political and legal system.

When the Constitution is changed or reinterpreted, the rules change. As with when the Supreme Court ruled that same-sex marriage was legal in 2015, for example.

Finally we have a kind of wild card power: Charismatic Authority, which is power legitimized by the extraordinary personal qualities of a leader. Jesus of Nazareth leading the new religious movement or Martin Luther King Jr. leading thousands of people in the Civil Rights movement are examples of personalities that mobilize precisely this kind of authority.

But authority that rests entirely on the qualities of one person can be unstable. So sometimes that power becomes transferred to something outside, separate from that one charismatic person.

This is called the Routinization of Charisma and it's where Charismatic Authority is transformed into some combination of Traditional and/or Rational-Legal Authority. The founding of the church after Jesus's death is a good example of this.

Now, just as there are different kinds of authority, so to are there different forms of government. For instance, democracy, a political system that gives power to the people as a whole, tends to be backed by Rational-Legal Authority.

This isn't terribly surprising since, in Weber's model, democracy is a form of government and a rational-legal approach to authority, both emerge with rationalization and the rise of bureaucracy.

And we can see a certain affinity between democracy and Rational-Legal Authority in the fact that leadership in democracies is linked to office holding. So the power is attached to a legally defined office, not to a particular person.

By contrast, monarchy is a political system in which power is legitimized by traditional authority and held by a single family. This is maybe most obvious in the Feudal European idea of the divine right of kings, in which the monarchs were held to be ordained by God from time immemorial.

And just as democracies are much more common in modern bureaucratic states, monarchies are more common in traditional agrarian societies.

But a certain type of authority doesn't always reside in the specific form of government. Monarchy, for example, is just one type of authoritarianism, which is any system that denies people participation in their own governance and leaves ruling to the elites.

And while monarchy relies on traditional authority, another variety of authoritarianism, totalitarianism, does not. Totalitarianism is a centralized political system that extensively regulates people's lives.

And it has some of the same affinities for Legal-Rational Authority that democracy does. Both are modern systems, for one thing, but it's also much easier to closely control a people through a system of bureaucratic rules.

For example, a totalitarian government might enact a law that, say, every household has to display a picture of the ruler. It's a small, bureaucratic rule with major political implications.

And democracy isn't always associated with Legal-Rational Authority either. Take the United States! The president has power because of rules set up in the Constitution which is a form of Legal-

Rational Authority, but hte president attains that power by winning an election, which can often rely on Charismatic Authority.

We can even see Traditional Authority of a kind at work in the reverence with which the Constitution and the "Founding Fathers" are invoked in political discourse.

Now, the US, as an example, can move us from what has so far been a pretty theoretical discussion of authority in politics to seeing how sociology can help us understand what they look like in practice.

To understand power, authority, and politics, we need to understand the political attitudes of a population. And to do this, we need to talk about the Political Spectrum, the broad array of beliefs and ideas that make up the politics of a society.

In the US, this ranges from Liberal on the left of the spectrum to Conservative on the right. And again, this isn't just a theoretical difference of ideas. These beliefs shape the distribution of power and resources in the US in some very fundamental ways.

On economic issues, for instance, Left-leaning or Liberal perspectives often favor government intervention in the economy to help guarantee ane quality of outcomes. Equal pay for women, equitable distribution of wealth among races, and regulations that promote workplace and product safety are all examples of economic issues that hte left is frequently concerned with.

By contrast, Conservative or Right-leaning perspective might prefer to take a more laissez-faire or "hands off" approach, in which government regulation is seen as hampering the natural flow of economic activity.

So that's how the political spectrum can look when it comes to economic matters. On social issues, one way of understanding the gap between left and right is in terms of the different kinds of authority that each faction tends to support or endorse.

Here, the Right tends to build its arguments on Traditional Authority, while the Left tends to look to Legal-Rational frameworks.

We can see this in the issue of marriage equality, for example. The Right has often described its opposition as a defense of traditional marriage. While the Left has argued that marriage equality was an extension of legal, civil rights.

Now, no matter where your political leanings lie on teh spectrum, in the end it would be pretty meaningless without some way to give them form in the struggle for things like power and wealth.

That's where political parties come in as well as interest groups like political action committees which organize around particular issues rather than around a whole party platform.

And beyond the formal institutional politics, there are also social movements that try to mobilize masses of people to further particular political goals. Black Lives Matter and the Tea Party are both good examples of this.

But lobbying, special interest groups, and social movements all raise difficult questions about how truly democratic the American system is. Why would you need to demonstrate in the streets if you're supposed to be able to express your political belief by voting?

The answer lies in sociological theories of power. That is, the different understandings of how power is distributed in a society.

One common view is known as the Pluralist Model, which sees power as being very widely distributed. In this view, politics is a matter of negotiation, but everyone has at least some voice in teh process.

This model was closely linked with Structural-Functionalist Theory and dominated much of American sociology in the 1950s and early 60s. In this line of thinking, demonstrations are seen as irrational outbursts; pointless gestures in a political system that already distributes political power fairly.

However, in the Power-Elite Model, political protests makes perfect sense. This view sees political power as being concentrated in the hands of small groups, especially among hte very rich.

If this is the case, protests may be the only way for many people to advance their interests and have their voices heard.

Finally, there's the Marxist Political Economy Model, which holds that both of the other two models really miss the point. Here, power isn't evenly distributed, but it's also not held by a strictly political elite.

Instead, the cause of the imbalance of power is seen as being systemic, and the powerful few are seen as the products of a particular economic system. So meaningful political change, in this understanding, is only possible through a change in the underlying economic system.

So, to understand politics in the United States or anywhere else, we need to look at all of the aspects we've talked about. The types of authority, the kinds of government, political beliefs, models of power, and how they all relate to each other.

Today we learned about the sociological approach to politics. We defined politics and power, we discussed the different types of authority and how they relate to different political systems, and we looked at American politics in some detail, talking about demographics and political organizations. Finally, we discussed different sociological theories of power.

===== Credits (9:30) =====

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