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Author explores politics of education

COMPARATIVE POLITICAL ANALYSIS

by Allen L. Larson

Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1980, 167 pages

By Terry G. Geske

There has been a growing emphasis in the field of education, particularly in areas such as Educational Administration and Educational Policy Studies, on politics and the political decision-making approach. A number of scholars of educational governance and administration have suggested that this recent development of political thinking represents a significant paradigm shift in the study of educational organizations. In the last two decades, for example, courses in educational administration have focused increasingly on political models of organizations, and concepts such as "muddling through," "political bargaining," and "coalition building" have gained increased attention. Given this increased use of the political perspective in education, the recent volume by Allan L. Larson on **Comparative Political Analysis** can offer some useful insights for the educator who is interested in educational policy-making.

This well-written volume basically explores political theory and the problems associated with differentiating and classifying governmental systems. The thrust of comparative analyses is concerned with the identification and explanation of similarities and differences in the workings of political institutions and the behavior of human beings. Typically, comparative political analysis focuses on different nations, countries, or states, but this approach may also be used to view social institutions, business organizations, or school districts. Comparative political analysis has been used, for example, to examine structural uniformities and differences in the special governmental arrangements for state educational systems.

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After discussing the scope of comparative political analysis, Larson describes the legal-institutional, decision-making, and power approaches to the study of political phenomena. He succinctly explores the characteristics and limitations of each approach and is quick to point out that these different conceptual schemes are not intended to be mutually exclusive. The point is forcefully made that different theories and frameworks should be used in a complementary manner, with each clarifying a given aspect of phenomena under study. Educational administrators, in particular, will appreciate the treatment of the decision-making approach, and the discussion of the impact of perceptions, values, information, and the like, on the decision-making process.

A separate chapter is devoted to structural-functional analysis, the dominant comparative methodology for investigating political systems today. Larson points out that structure addresses the question, "How is the political system arranged?", whereas function addresses the question, "What does the political system do?". In addressing either of these questions, the culture or the environment in which the political system is embedded becomes a terribly important consideration. The chapter concludes by clarifying the advantages of structural-functional analysis, and describing the specific functions of any political system.

Chapter four explores general systems analysis, which like structural-functional analysis, provides a framework for analyzing whole systems. This chapter essentially treats the following major concepts in some detail: system, environment, feedback, and response. The discussion of environment, for example, emphasizes that society consists of many different systems which interact and continually influence one another. Hence, in order to structure systematically the relationships between a given system and its total environment, an input-output framework is used to organize and manipulate the data collected. Larson provides an evaluation of systems theory, and suggests that the utility of this approach remains to be demonstrated through future empirical work.

In the next and most extensive chapter, the author explores the use of political theory and the scientific approach in the study of politics. This chapter is essentially concerned with problems of scientific objectivity in political analysis, and with the role of values in political inquiry. The new political science is marked by a group of behavioralists who have developed natural science methodologies to focus on the politically oriented behavior of individuals and groups. These behavioralists, for example, have increasingly seized upon the use of mathematical models in their attempts to achieve greater scientific objectivity. Several distinctions are drawn between the social sciences and the natural sciences, and the basic idea is developed that values cannot be divorced from social science inquiry in general, and political analysis in particular. Thus, considerable attention is directed to the notion of values as objects of inquiry and values as personal preferences and commitments. Since values permeate the political world under study, the problem becomes one of how to incorporate the values involved, and make them explicit in the analytical process.

Larson points out in Chapter six that the dominant trend in political science in recent years has been the attempt to place the study of politics in a much broader context. There is a growing consensus that comparative politics should become crosscultural as well as cross-

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national, and thus comparative politics is becoming more concerned with seeking out generalizations that are common to all political systems worldwide. Accordingly, the influences and effects of cultural settings, social systems, and interpersonal relationships on political behavior are becoming much more important. The volume concludes with a very brief statement regarding the need for research on the evaluation of political systems.

In summary, this volume provides a thorough yet succinct survey of the field of comparative politics. The author explores earlier historical methods as well as

contemporary approaches to the study of comparative politics, and also addresses a number of philosophical and theoretical issues inherent in these different methodologies. Given the increased emphasis on the political decision-making process in education, this volume can provide a new and different perspective for the educator who is interested in the study of the politics of education. A number of the topics discussed in this volume, e.g., systems theory, decision-making approaches, objectivity and values, and social sciences phenomena, should prove interesting to people in the field of education.