

A Systems Model Applicable to Domestic Politics

Charles Hantz

The failure of systems theory to live up to its initial potential was due to the difficulties encountered when attempting to test it. The theory's high level of abstraction made operationalization problematic, while subsequent models opened up the "black box" to reveal a daunting mass of complexity. So crushing was its collapse that systems theory exists within domestic politics in name only. As a remedy, this paper applied novel approaches in both the contextual and organizational spheres and produced a model capable of being operationalized.

Keywords: systems theory, domestic politics, levels of analysis, conceptualization, methodology

INTRODUCTION: THE RISE AND FALL OF SYSTEMS THEORY

When it had migrated to political science in the 1950s, systems theory was a revelation (Easton, 1957). It knitted different strands of thought and methodology into a tapestry which promised to usher in a new era to the discipline (Miller, 1971). The theory married structural functionalism and quantitative methods as part of the new emphasis on understanding human interactions. The behavioralist revolution moved political science from its longstanding emphasis on historical studies of institutions to an approach grounded in the scientific methods of research. Empiricism would eliminate the bias of interpretation and conclusions would stand on provable rather than persuadable ground. So promising was the theory it was believed by those who championed it that its potential extended far beyond these advancements in methodology. With its analysis of the "whole" rather than the political system's constituent parts, it was expected that from out of systems theory could develop a general theory of politics, and advocates went as far to assert that it might even prove capable of evolving into a universal theory applicable to all fields and subfields (Easton, 1985).

This confidence in the theory's utility stemmed from its purported ability to explain stability under sustained dynamic conditions. That political systems would actively pursue stability by employing varied responses to events and forces that sought to undermine it placed them alongside other systems, such as social, biological, cybernetic, and mechanical, which shared the same characteristics. Though it would find a home in Comparative Politics and International Relations, by the early 1970s systems theory had been largely discarded by many in American Politics (Lu and Dickson, 2020). Critics of the writings of David Easton, systems theory most prolific supporter, had called into question not only its utility as a theory (Kaplan, 1968), but warned that its pursuit would prove counterproductive to the discipline's future (Leslie, 1972). Its critics won the debate and American Politics abandoned the theory. The purpose of this paper is to revitalize the promise of systems theory by developing a model capable of becoming operational.

Systems Theory and the Problems of Operationalization

FIGURE 1
INPUT-OUTPUT SYSTEM MODEL

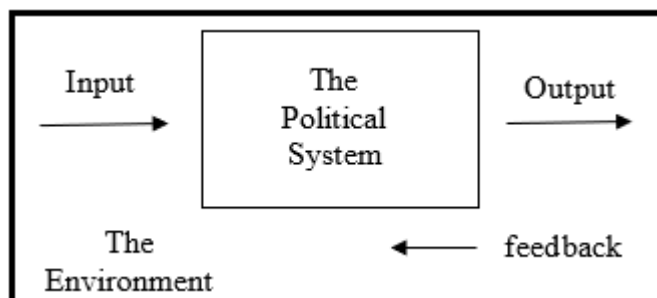


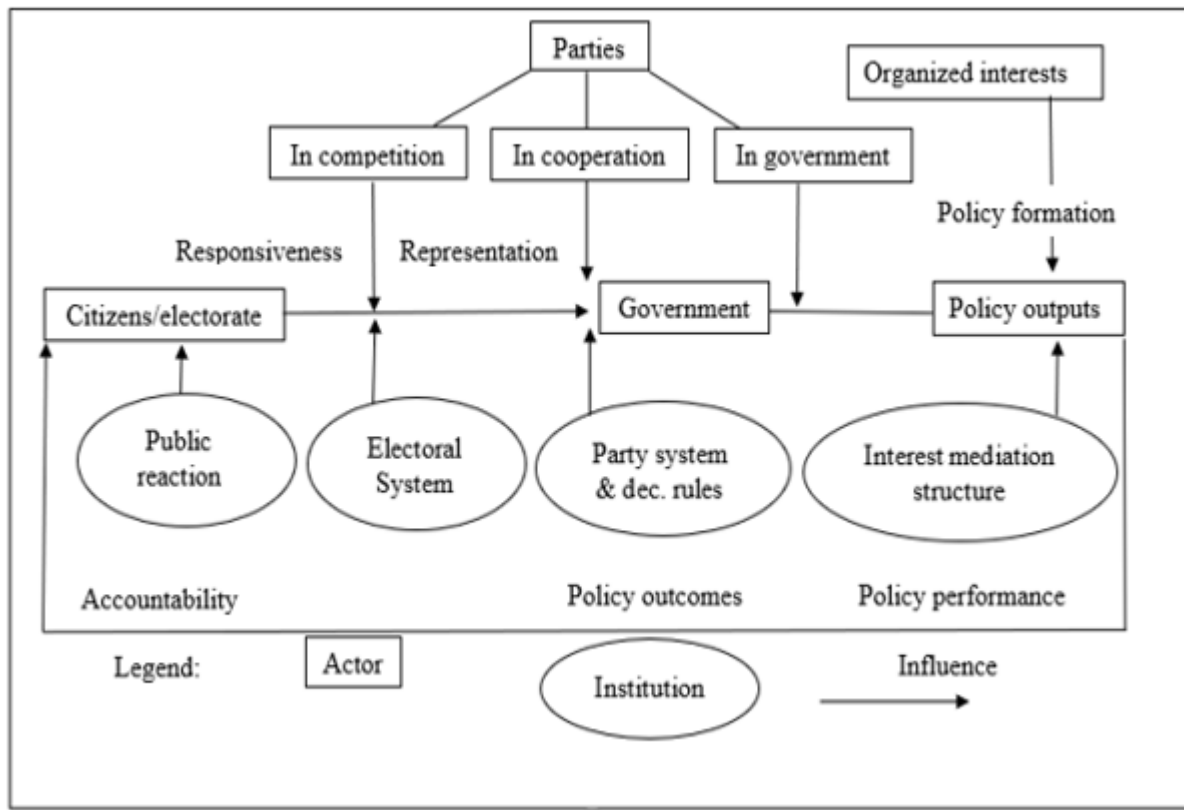
Figure 1 illustrates how the theory works. Through its porous borders the political system receives a stimulus from the Environment. In response it produces an output which the Environment assesses and a new input is generated, thereby completing the loop. The process would begin anew and continue unabated as long as the polity existed, though not necessarily its political system which could be changed, abolished, or swapped for an entirely different one. To avoid any of these adverse outcomes, the political system maintained systemic order and harmony by adjusting its outputs to compensate for disturbances, demands, or a lack of support emanating from the Environment (Parsons et al., 2017). The political system's efforts to not only maintain itself but to persist over the long term were of particular interest to the observer as its behavior reflected group choices and decisions, and it was believed embedded within those behaviors might reside universal laws.

Those attempting to unearth these laws soon encountered insurmountable problems, and foremost amongst them was the model's high level of abstraction (Weltman 1972). Easton had conceptualized the political system as a "black box" with the observer located outside of the polity. From this vantage point the observer could record the interactions between the Environment and the political system, but this location also made it impossible for the observer to assess the mechanizations occurring within. Not being able to see what was happening inside the system had created uncertainty. Did *Plessey v Ferguson* and *Brown v Board of Education* originate from similar inputs? Did the Civil Rights Act of 1964 signify the beginning of systemic change or the return of equilibrium to it?

The abstract nature of Easton's model had rendered operationalization impossible, and so with little choice scholars began to produce models with greater specificity, such as the one found in Figure 2 (Keman and Pennings, 2006). The model included a variety of actors and processes, mapped out with arrows indicating the direction of influence. The authors had hoped others would use their model as the basis for generating "more specific hypotheses for empirical research" (Keman, 2016:88). Unfortunately, this hope was never realized. None of the fifty-one works cited by Google Scholar nor any of the eleven citations of Keman's 2016 chapter which also featured their model attempted to operationalize it.

If the Kemen-Pennings model was viewed as more barrier than gateway to operationalization, it was in good company. For example, a reviewer of Herbert Wiseman's book, *Political systems: some sociological approaches*, published at the height of systems theory's influence, wished Wiseman had "provided a general conceptual scheme for the analysis of political macro-systems" (Bell, 1967:92). Less charitably a second reviewer described the book as a "hopeless conceptual and theoretical morass" (LaPolombara, 1967:294). These critiques could apply in varying degrees to all systems models, including to Keman and Pennings whose model, like Wiseman's, failed to break new definitional and conceptual ground. With its mishmash of actors, institutions, systems, and interrelationships, the model was more conducive to the application and testing of mid-range theory rather than serving as a useful aid in pushing the boundaries of systems theory.

FIGURE 2
CHAIN OF DEMOCRATIC CONTROL AND COMMAND: PERFORMANCE AS A SEQUENTIAL SYSTEM



(Pennings et al., 2006:184).

Reassessing the Keman-Pennings Model

One step that could help address this “mishmash” is simply to contextualize the model. For instance, Action-Network Theory posits that actors operate in a web of power-based relationships that connects them to other actors in the system. Additionally, the more powerful amongst them exert their preferences by using their network connectivity to reduce the agency of those actors who hold contrarian views or to rally like-minded actors (Kamp, 2018). In this depiction of a system, the actors move about in an effort to gain advantage and the sum of their interactions account for the observed behavior (Burns, 2006). James Rosenau (1990) used a similar analysis to explain turbulence in world politics. In this recasting of systems theory, it was the inability of system-level actors to address the increasingly high demands of emerging, lower-level actors that led to the instability of the system.

This brief overview of Action-Network Theory and Rosenau’s turbulence thesis points to three conclusions. The first is that given the centrality of actors as drivers of systemic behavior the study of political systems would best be served by an ‘actors first’ approach (Olaya and Gomez-Quintero, 2016). Second, power has been purposefully distributed unequally in a system where system-level actors maintain the system’s stability. For Rosenau and others, this marriage of power and purpose becomes especially apparent during times of internal chaos and systemic duress (Drezner, 2014). Third, if a system can be defined as the sum of its actors and systemic behavior the sum of their interactions, then the analysis of a system requires not only the identification of its actors, but also knowing their relative positions to each other since it is the hierarchy which drives systemic behavior.

Organizing the Research Arena

An actor's first approach requires that the unwieldy universe of political actors found in Keman-Pennings model be organized, and the initial step to achieving that is the sorting of its contents into a typology. A typology is produced by placing like items into their own group, and that which is to be sorted are the research arena's units of analysis (Stapley, et al., 2022). To qualify as a unit of analysis in International Relations an entity must be capable of interacting with other entities. Individual leaders representing the Group of 20 countries, for example, might interact with each other at annual summits, or on a larger scale their respective countries may now have to interact with each other based on whatever agreements might have been reached. But the policies themselves, those agreements reached by the countries' leaders, would be incapable of formulating a response and so would not qualify as a unit of analysis. A unit of analysis must therefore include human beings, either one or a collection of them. Consequently, those common areas of study in domestic politics that do not include a human being, such as public opinion and the policymaking process, would fail the 'person-test' and not qualify as a unit of analysis (Yurdusev, 1993).

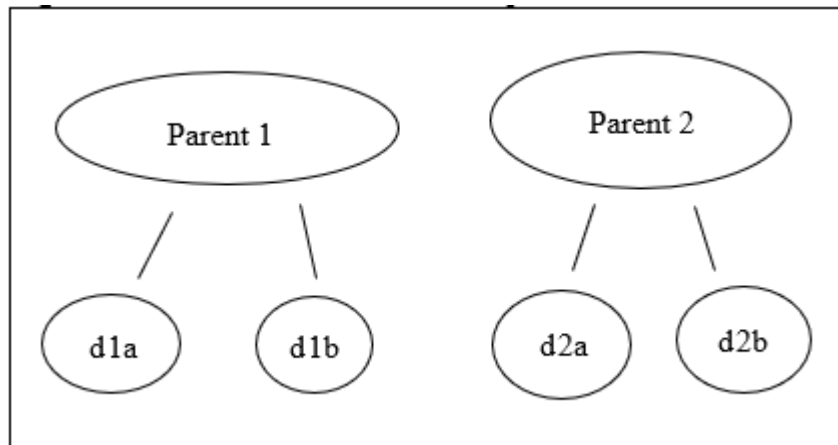
With this test in mind, we can organize the universe of domestic political actors by collapsing them into different groups based on a shared trait (Mandara, 2003). For example, the Democratic and Republican parties are composed of groups of people and so each would pass the person-test. They also share the common trait of being political parties. Grouping all political parties under a single label, in this case 'Political Parties' as Keman and Pennings did in their model, gives us our first *type* of political actor. This group is composed exclusively of political parties and excludes all others which are not political parties. We need not look too hard or far for many of the remaining typologies of actors as most are conveniently found as chapter headings in many American Government textbooks. At the national level of politics, these types include the individual, the media, interest groups, and candidates for elected office and their campaigns. Other entities which include human beings are Congress, the executive branch, the bureaucracy, and the federal courts, and these have been placed into a group labeled 'Government institutions.'

In addition to these types of actors are three which form on a mostly informal basis. The first type are those individuals who identify with a political party. Partisans span the spectrum of involvement from activists deeply invested in a party's fortune to those who identify only tangentially with the party. Regardless of the level of attachment to a specific party, all are partisans and were placed into a group of political actors labeled "Partisan groups."

The second informal type of actor consists of those groups which form based on ideological preference. Many of these groups can trace their origins to a larger ideological group from which they deviated. From the population of Marxists have come various derivatives (Çam, T. and Kayaoğlu, 2015), and the same splintering occurred within the macro-group of classical liberals (Siegel, 2011). It is those groups which have split from the original that attract the most attention because most Americans happen belong to one of them. In the United States there exists large formations of conservatives and liberals, for instance, as well as others who consider themselves communists, socialists, libertarians, or other. In fact, this phenomenon of a precursor group generating a derivative has continued (see Figure 3), with derivative groups experiencing their own splintering into smaller groups whose names often have the prefix "neo."

The second step in organizing the research arena is to place the types of actors into a levels of analysis framework (Singer, 1961). For a number of decades International Relations has incorporated a level of analysis framework as both an organizing tool and a staple of research. The importance of this framework goes beyond the placement of research targets into specific locations of the research arena, though, as it also serves to "provide the basic vocabulary of concepts and terms that may be used to construct the kinds of causal explanations expected of theory" (McGinnis and Ostrom, 2014: 1).

FIGURE 3
PARENT-DERIVATIVE RELATIONSHIP



Sorting the types of political actors listed in Table 1 produced three distinct clusters of actors, and these were then assigned to one of three levels of analysis. The level at the bottom of the hierarchy, the micro-level, is typically home to the most basic of the units of analysis. All other types of actors would have a more complex structure while none a more rudimentary. At the top of the hierarchy is the broadest level of structure, the macro-level. No other structure exists above it. Only those actors at this level are capable of inducing the system to respond to its demands and as such it is the only level from which the system may be observed (Singer, 1961). To the middle or meso-level go the remaining classes of actors. The actors found here are more complex than micro-level actors but less salient to the system than those from the macro-level.

TABLE 1
TYPE OF POLITICAL ACTORS

Individual
Media
Interest groups
Political parties
Candidates
Campaigns
Partisan groups
Government institutions
Derivative ideological groups
Parent ideological groups

The convention in IR is to place the individual into the micro-level and to rename it the Individual level. This leaves nine types of political actors unassigned to a level, all of whom share the trait of being composed of a group of individuals. As this is their only distinguishing characteristic (as far as this paper's typology is concerned), it necessitates their placement *en masse* into either of the two remaining levels, the meso or macro. If placed into the macro-level, it would leave the meso-level devoid of actors. Additionally, their presence in this level would also imply that each type of actor has the capacity to affect the system unilaterally, a claim for which there is no support in the literature, but to populate the meso-level with all nine types would leave the macro-level barren. This problem could be resolved in one of three ways. The

first possibility is that an ‘unknown’ type of actor inhabits the macro-level. Though the paradox, “You don’t know what you don’t know,” cautions against absolutes, this supposition seems unlikely since Table 1’s list of actor types was even more expansive than that compiled by Keman and Pennings. The second possibility is that domestic politics has only two levels of analysis, and for this to be the case depends on a negative finding from the third possibility, and that is that one or more of the nine remaining types of actors belongs in the macro-level.

Based on the Keman-Pennings model, political parties seem the most likely candidate to graduate to the top spot. Modern parties, especially in a parliamentary context, might be capable of fulfilling this role, but moving to a presidential system decreases their power and influence. Furthermore, nothing in Keman and Pennings’s description of parties suggested that they had considered political parties for a macro-level role. It may be that political parties are very strong meso-level actors but the decision to promote them absent any compelling rationale would at this point be premature.

If not political parties, then those organized interests which exist outside of a party structure represent the next best macro-level option. However active these organized interests may be, there exists no support in the literature to assume they are more important or powerful than political parties. There was a reason Keman and Pennings placed ‘Organized interests’ below ‘Political parties,’ and it would violate standards of logic to place the system’s second most influential actor in the tier above its most powerful. If not political parties and organized interests, then it is even less likely that some of the other types of actors make it to the macro-level. Government institutions sit downstream of parties, organized interests, and elections, which should eliminate it as a possibility, while the media, candidates, and campaigns are all severely limited in scope and strength. The elimination of political parties also drops their groups of partisan supporters from consideration, which leaves only those groups of an ideological nature.

The importance of ideology stems from its influence on the political behaviors of the individual. Liberals and conservatives, for example, regularly confer one party with over ninety percent of their support in presidential elections (Hartig et al., 2025). Individuals with ideological beliefs form an informal group of like-minded ideologues who then act in near unison (Greis, 2017; Norval, 2000). And they do so without ever being told to. That ideology matters is not the issue. What matters methodologically is the hierarchical relationship between the two types of ideological actors, that is, do they reside at the same or different levels? The choices are that either one, both, or neither group belongs in the macro-level, and unfortunately the Keman-Pennings model offers no guidance on this issue.

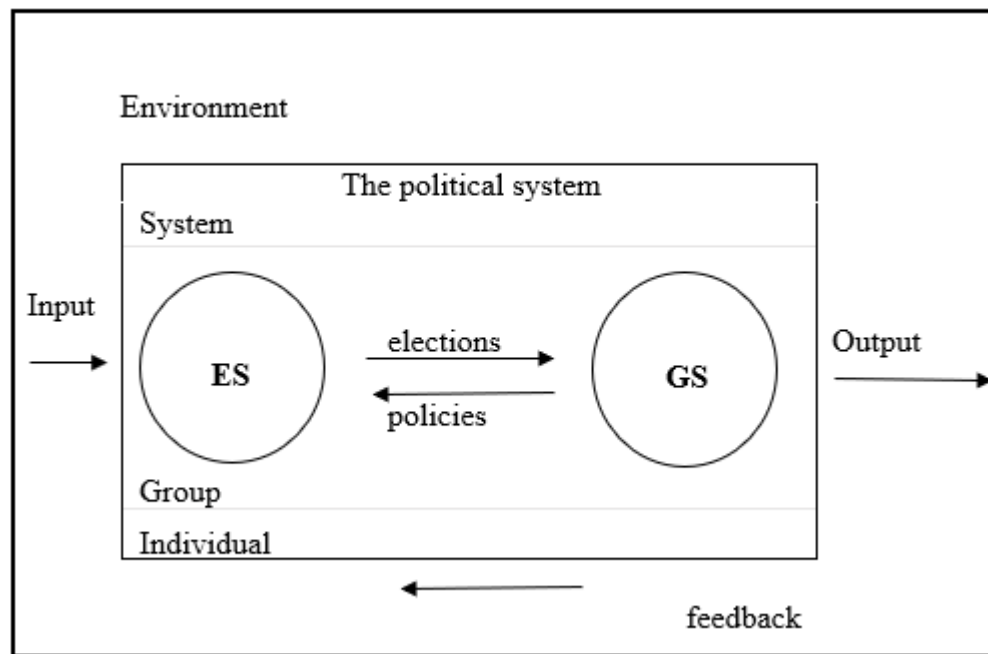
For some, the idea of a parent ideological group may fall into the category of the previously dismissed ‘unknown’ type of actor. After all, over the past decades the Hartzian view that the country’s political system developed from Lockean liberalism has fallen out of favor (Furstenberg, 2012; Iton, 2005; Kloppenberg 2010; Smith, 1993). Current social and political realities likewise contribute to Locke’s obscurity. Polling organizations never (or almost never) have Locke as a survey topic, in large part because the general population does not connect Locke to their own ideological leanings. If people are unaware of this connection, large swaths of them are nevertheless keenly aware of the principles of the ideology. Liberty, limited and representative government, private ownership, equality, and individualism rank high in polls as priorities that government should generally protect (Gao, 2015). People may not recognize the author of their ideological principles but they have nevertheless found common cause in having adopted them.

This paper assumed the existence of this amorphous group, which made its relationship to its derivative offspring of critical importance. Keman and Pennings share the widely held notion that a political party’s policy preference is dependent upon the ideological preferences of its derivative supporters and parties then act to induce government policy through success in the electoral process. In contrast there is no known relationship between a parent ideological group, a political party, and its partisan group. In fact, the only relationships that a parent ideological group has is with its derivatives. Yet according to Action-Network Theory a web should connect all types of actors within a given level of analysis, and this would especially be true with one as populated with actors as the meso-level. That this is not the case with parent ideological groups suggests that these groups do not exist in the meso-level but reside in the macro.

That this must be the case is bolstered by a levels of analysis framework which aggregates types of actors (recall that a type of actor includes every unit-level actor that shares the typology) into one of three levels. From out of these “groups of aggregation” evolves an interlevel relationship such that a level acts as the independent variable for the level below it and the dependent variable for the one above (Hollis and Smith, 1990: 8). Each level is a discrete entity, but within the lateral structure of the framework blossoms a myriad of relationships in which actors directly interact with each other (as illustrated by the Keman-Pennings model). This is not the case with the framework’s vertical structure, however, as unit-level actors are not free to interact with one another. The web of connectivity exists only as an intralevel phenomenon which accounts for the parent ideological group’s lack of connectivity with other actors. Consequently, parent ideological groups were placed into the system level and the other actors remained in the meso. These levels were renamed System and Group, respectively.

Though individual political actors are a system’s building blocks, it is its subsystems which sustain it by fulfilling specific functional roles (Burton, 2010: 6; Easton, 1965: 284-285). To identify these subsystems involved creating another typology from those types of actors found in the Group level of analysis. The first subsystem was the easiest to identify since it consisted of only one type of group. Government institutions are responsible for creating policy, while the function of the remaining types of actors is to populate those institutions through an electoral process. This division yielded two subsystems, the electoral and the governmental. The model in Figure 4 shows the two subsystems operating at the Group level of analysis.

FIGURE 4
POLITY MODEL WITH LEVELS OF ANALYSIS AND SUBSYSTEMS

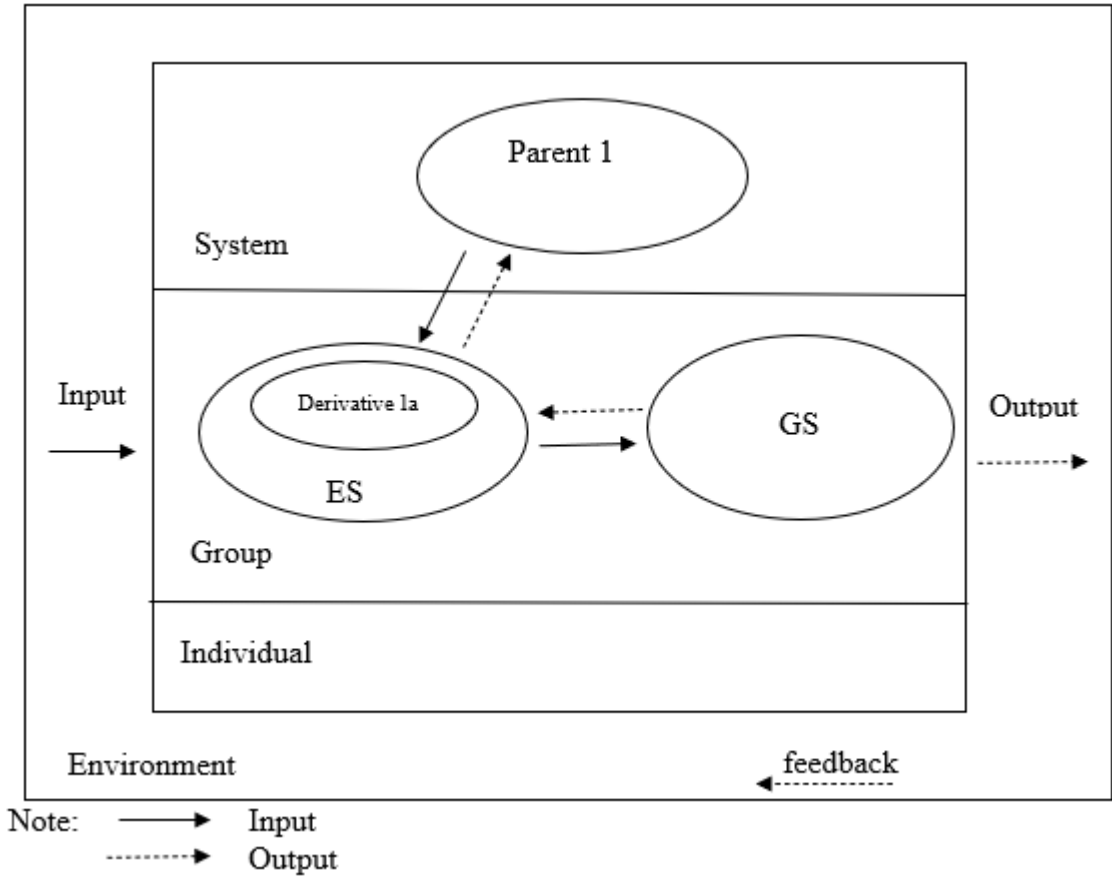


RESULTS: CONCEPTUALIZING THE NEW MODEL

The political system’s hierarchical structure means that it operates in a top-down manner. The parent ideological group communicates directly with its derivatives regarding the status of the system. At the group-level, derivative groups attempt to dominate the electoral subsystem (ES) acting through a web of connectivity. Success in the ES leads to success in the governmental subsystem (GS). Derivative ideological groups would then evaluate the output from GS, and this becomes the basis for their feedback

to the parent ideological group. The parent group assesses the feedback and develops a new input for its derivatives, finishing the loop.

FIGURE 5
POLITY MODEL WITH SYSTEMIC FLOW PATTERN



System-level actors have the responsibility of assessing the system’s overall health, and their evaluation gets communicated to derivative groups. Thus, the most important relationship is that which connects the system-level parent ideological group to its group-level derivative groups. These groups then agitate within the Group level, in the process activating their associated group-level actors whose sole goal is to dominate the Electoral subsystem. The connection between derivative and associated groups constitutes the second most important relationship. This conceptualization differs from that depicted in Figure 4, so a revised model (Figure 5) has been produced.

CONCLUSIONS: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

The goal of this paper was to produce a model of systems theory capable of being operationalized. That there are now two outputs to analyze, each stemming from a subsystem, is helpful, especially since the heart of system analysis is the organization and coding of data (Wasson, 2015). The task of interpreting this data was made easier as each of the outputs follow a determinate, interrelated, and coherent pattern, and the patterns which emerge reflect one of two possible states, equilibrium when the status quo is not under duress and disequilibrium during those times when it is. In its most basic form, system analysis consists of drawing inferences by analyzing data (subsystemic outputs) during those times that the system is placid and comparing that data with those times when the political system feels stress.

Though in some ways more refined than previous models, the new polity model did not address all questions. It did not explain how environmental inputs would be linked to the behavior of the political system, and with the new model came new issues. If system-level actors dominate the system, how exactly is this accomplished and how can it be detected? Also, what is the nature of the output emitted from the political system and what role does it play in systems theory? Despite these questions, or perhaps because of them, it is hoped that this new model, or an improved successor, would suffice as the basis for “more specific hypotheses for empirical research” and be a springboard to the eventual use of systems theory in the study of domestic political systems.

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