EXAMPLE II: The Relationship Between Political Development & Modernization

Modernization theory was developed by comparative political scientists and sociologists to explain the causal relationship between political development and economic development. The theory states that variables such as high levels of industrialization, per capita GNP, urbanization and education will lead to increases in the level of democratic participation. (Lipsett, 75).

Modernization in a country is marked by industrialization, characterized by high levels of economic growth and the displacement of primitive modes of production. Industrialization creates a demand for labor in urban areas; at the same time, the extension of capitalist investment and production into rural areas makes it increasingly difficult to maintain a rural subsistence lifestyle. The rural population, which makes up the majority in the early states of modernization, is characterized as uneducated, diffuse and with little structural opportunity for collective action.

As more and more rural dwellers migrate to urban areas, the new urban class finds itself in a context much more conducive to collective action and political participation. Industrial employment creates shared interests for workers as a class, often leading to the formation of trade unions to bargain for better working conditions. The urban setting is also more conducive to increased levels of education, both because people live closer to one another, and because the more complex milieu of the city requires a higher level of intellectual skills in order to survive.

The combination of newly created societal wealth, higher levels of education, and increased collective activity by the working class leads this group to demand a greater share in the society’s resources. Because of high rates of economic growth, governments and societal elites are more willing to bargain with the lower classes and to begin to share the newly created wealth. Because the lower classes wish to maintain some control over societies resources in the future as well, a significant factor in their demands is the extension of political participation. The process
of industrialization, then, with its concurrent aspects of increased levels of education, urbanization and economic growth, provides the conditions in which both the lower classes demand and the elite groups grant the extension of political participation.

The data provided in the “DISORDER” DATA SET describe eighty six countries according to a number of economic, political and social categories. This paper will discuss the correlation between political development, defined as mature, participatory democracy, to level of economic development, GNP per capita, level of urbanization and percentage of primary and secondary school enrollments in the 15-19 age group. Level of democracy was defined in categories of: (1) personalist; (2) elitist; (3) centrist; (4) new democracy; and (5) old democracy. I am treating the level of economic development of a country as an indication of its level of industrialization, categorized as: (1) High (developed); (2) Medium (transitional); and (3) Low (low). Each independent variable will be analyzed separately in its relationship with the dependent variable of political development.

Statistical analysis demonstrates a high correlation between each independent variable and the level of political development. Each correlation is above (.52), with the highest correlations between economic level and political development (-.73), and GNP and political development (.68). The measures of the level of political development and level of economic development are negatively correlated because a high rate of economic development is coded as a low ordinal value, while the reverse is true for political development. Bivariate regression for the relationship between Political development and each of the independent variable confirms that these correlations are statistically significant at the 95% level of confidence (p< .000 in each case). This makes sense because the sample, in fact, makes up a large percentage of the total population of countries in the world.
Regression also provides $R^2$ of each of the independent variables on political development ranging from 27.7 to 52.8%. The statistical results allow us to conclude a significant relationship between each dependent variable, industrialization (economic level), urbanization, education levels, per capita GNP and the independent variable of political development. The data give good support for the relationship between the different aspects of modernization and democracy. However, as regression analysis demonstrates, there is significant unaccounted for error within each of the regression models. Statistical analysis does not show causation, but rather relation. According to the regression of political development against industrialization (economic level) in particular, we might conclude that industrialization will be an important condition for democracy, but not a sufficient one.

Besides the error unaccounted for in the statistical models, there are other problems which should be noted in drawing conclusions about the relationships between the variables. First, assigning different countries to different categories is necessary for purposes of quantification; but, it is also somewhat arbitrary. For instance, what criteria were used to decide whether or not a country was elitist or centrist? What level of industrialization was used to categorize a country as ‘high’ as opposed to ‘medium?’ In order to clearly interpret the results of such statistical data, it is necessary to consider the background criteria for quantification.

In addition, it is important to point out that the regression analysis may be affected by assigning different countries to ordinal categories, in the cases political cluster and economic cluster. The variable shave been assigned discrete values according to the data set; but we assume that we are using grouped data, and that countries in each category will be distributed around the mean of that category. For instance, for countries in the middle economic cluster (#3), we can assume that some members of this group are closer to the lower category (#4) and some are
closer to the higher one (#5). So, even though the categories are presented as discrete, we are assuming that the underlying sample is actually interval; and we interpret the regression analyses with this in mind.

Statistical analysis of this sort of data does not prove causality, but rather demonstrates some degree of relationship, or lack thereof, between variables. It can be useful in testing or supplementing the evidence for theoretical arguments or other types of empirical evidence. In terms of Modernization Theory, similar kinds of statistical analysis from the 1950s and early 1960s was used to support the proposition that political development, or participatory democracy, was correlated primarily with modernization, characterized by industrialization, urbanization, economic growth and literacy. The results of my statistical analysis reflect the same general findings that Seymour Martin Lipset encountered in his statistical analysis of European and Latin American countries (Lipset, p. 74-81). However, this theory failed to predict or explain the advent of Bureaucratic Authoritarian regimes in the countries of South America which, according to the criteria of Modernization Theory and the corresponding statistical data analyzed above, should have been least likely to become undemocratic.

This is perhaps a good example of relying too heavily on statistical correlation in explaining outcomes. Statistical models are hindered by their limitations in accounting for all the variables which intervene to affect the outcome in a particular situation. Although modernizationist’s were not necessarily claiming causality, in terms of their statistical correlations, the theory came to be recognized as an equation of economic development as the primary factor or even determinant of political development.

After the military coups of the mid-1960s and early 1970s in the most modernized nations of South America, new theories emerged which tried to account for the variables which
intervened to prevent the continuation of political development on the linear path predicted by Modernization Theory. Structural variables, such as the influence of the international economic system and the crisis of the “deepening” phase of industrialization were posited by Dependency Theory and Bureaucratic Authoritarianism, respectively. As the more recent trend of democratization demonstrates, political science has still been unable to account for all of the variables which act in influencing the outcome of political development.

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