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WZB Discussion Paper, No. FS III 93-203

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Suggested Citation: Fuchs, Dieter (1993) : A metatheory of the democratic process, WZB Discussion Paper, No. FS III 93-203, Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung (WZB), Berlin

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Publication Series of the Research Unit **Institutions and Social Change** of the
Research Area Social Change, Institutions and Mediation Processes of the
Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung

FS III 93-203

A Metatheory of the Democratic Process

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Berlin, July 1993

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Cataloguing in publication data:
Fuchs, Dieter, 1993:
A Metatheory of the
Democratic Process.
Discussion Paper FS III 93-203.
Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin.

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Abstract

The metatheory on the democratic process poses a conceptual framework for the empirical analysis of democratic processes in liberal democracies. A model of democratic processes is being developed which proceeds from certain meta-theoretical presuppositions. It distinguishes, inter alia, between three subsystems of the political system and defines their relevant collective actors. Moreover, a concept of political structures and political performance is being proposed to provide theoretically for an empirical explanation of diverse process phenomena by different structural arrangements in liberal democracies.

Zusammenfassung

Die Metatheorie des demokratischen Prozesses ist ein begrifflicher Bezugsrahmen zur empirischen Analyse der demokratischen Prozesse in den liberalen Demokratien. Ausgehend von bestimmten metatheoretischen Grundannahmen wird ein Modell des demokratischen Prozesses entwickelt. Dieses enthält u.a. eine Abgrenzung von drei Subsystemen des politischen Systems und eine Bestimmung der relevanten kollektiven Akteure dieser drei Subsysteme. Zur theoretischen Vorbereitung der empirischen Erklärung unterschiedlicher Prozeßphänomene durch unterschiedliche strukturelle Arrangements liberaler Demokratien wird zudem ein Konzept politischer Strukturen und politischer Performanz vorgeschlagen.

1. The Context of Inquiry¹

The general field of inquiry at the Berlin Science Center 'Institutions and Social Change' Research Unit is the ability of political institutions in modern societies appropriately to register and process the problems generated by the changes these societies experience. A large number of theoretical diagnoses have questioned this ability. To the extent that such doubt is empirically tenable, the question arises as to the functional equivalence of individual institutions or institutional arrangements that prove better able to solve problems. Our first step will be to elucidate the concrete and topical significance of this general issues by dealing briefly with the most important diagnoses to date. Against this background, we will then seek to demonstrate that a metatheory of the democratic process is required as a precondition for analysing the issue raised by these theoretical diagnoses. The envisaged metatheory is thus a prerequisite for such analysis, not the analysis itself.

Since about the mid-seventies, theoretical diagnosis has been dominated by the hypothesis that political decision-making processes are subject to structurally determined closure towards on-going modernization demands put forward by citizens². Such demands were understood - at least in empirical social research - to be especially those arising within the framework of the development of postmaterialist value orientations (Inglehart 1977, 1990). Closure towards new demands was attributed to two structural factors evidencing differing degrees of consolidation. In the first place, it was attributed to the inertia of party

1 I would like to express my gratitude for the constructive criticism and useful hints given on a first version of this paper by my colleagues in the WZB 'Social Change, Institutions and Intermediation Processes' research unit and to Klaus von Beyme who was guest professor here in 1992/93. My thanks are also due to Rhodes Barrett for translating the German text into English.

2 A comparable discussion had taken place in the seventies, but from a completely different theoretical perspective. The point of reference of the hypothesis of a structurally determined closure of the political system towards demands made by society was in this case not so much specific *interests* as interests of specific *social groups*. See *inter alios* Bachrach and Baratz (1962, 1963) and Offe (1969).

systems that have evolved in the course of history, systems that came into being on the basis of quite different interests (materialist group interests), and in the second place to the logic of competition between parties in representative democracies as such. The orientation of competing parties towards maximising their share of the vote implies an orientation towards voter majorities. This in its turn implies a structural tendency to closure vis à vis minority interests. This constitutes closure towards new demands only to the extent that new demands are also minority demands. It has now become almost commonplace in academic argument to regard the increasing use of non-institutionalized forms of action and the formation of new social movements as a consequence of this structurally-determined closure vis à vis new demands.

The perspective shifted to become somewhat more radical in about the mid-eighties. Authors like Offe (1985) and Beck (1986) take as their point of departure the fact *that* the use of non-institutionalized forms of action and the consolidation of the new social movements as collective actors on the political scene have become durable and important factors in the political process³. As far as the democratic process is concerned, this means that the political decision makers are permanently confronted by a *new* type of demand⁴ (postmaterialist or life-world demands) that attempt to exercise direct influence not mediated by the political parties. Beck (1986) describes this development as the perception and assertion of democratic action spaces within the system of rules governing representative democracy. In practical terms, however, this involves undermining the traditional function of the party system proposed by the model of liberal democracy, which is to filter (and thus limit) demands made on political decision makers and to disburden the decision-making process from the constraints of having to establish legitimacy. Offe and Beck therefore

3 As far as the collectivity of citizens is concerned, this assumption is empirically confirmed by the results of representative population surveys in a number of western European countries. The acceptance of new social movements and the noninstitutionalized forms of action used by them is very marked in these countries, and is tending to increase (Fuchs 1991, Fuchs and Rucht 1993).

4 What Inglehart calls postmaterialist demands are referred to in other theoretical contexts as life-world demands (see Habermas 1981; Offe 1985; Raschke 1985). The two concepts are not identical in meaning, but do overlap to a considerable extent.

diagnose the erasure of boundaries in the political system. Even if the party systems still leaned towards closure, the perception and assertion of democratic action spaces would have generally opened the political decision-making system to societal demands, a process that becomes a problem in its turn. We can describe this problem as the ousting of politics or as a loss in the capacity to make decisions and shape events brought about by the obliteration of boundaries.

The Offe and Beck's arguments introduced aspects that have been taken up and intensified in the current discussion on postmodernization. Offe and, in particular, Beck take as their point of departure the disintegration of the social structure of modern industrial society, regarding the individualization of life situations as the consequence of this development (see also Zapf 1987). This individualization is one of the causes of the erasure of boundaries in politics, since it is one of the factors contributing to the articulation of new and more demands on politics. However, since this multitude of demands has a common material core, which can be more precisely defined in terms of the concept of postmaterialism or the life-world paradigm, it relates to a limited loss of boundaries in the political system that can be comprehended as an expression of *differentiation*. This type of differentiation certainly does not enhance either the decision-making ability of the political system nor its aggregational capacity, but it does not necessarily lead to paralysis. If demands are both specific in content and stable, it is possible to take them into permanent account. It is a different matter when demands are *fragmented*, as is claimed especially within the framework of the postmodernization discussion (see Gibbins 1989; Crook, Pakulski and Waters 1992; Fuchs and Klingemann 1993). The progressive dissolution of durable patterns of political orientation is seen to be superseded either by a multitude of individual demands obeying the logic of the mass-media in agenda-setting, or by transient demand packages representing rather amorphous amalgams of a wide variety of ideological elements. Even if we dismiss this as theoretical exaggeration, it does broadly coincide with current interpretations of particularistic and anomic tendencies in

Western societies advanced especially by journalists and politicians (e.g., Kleinert 1992).

If we accept the premise of the particularization or fragmentation of citizens' demands (and there is something to be said for it), what would this mean for the capacity of the political system to act and to shape events? The most efficient and the legitimate point of reference on which the collective actors in the political system (parties, government) can orient their activities in the interest of acquiring and sustaining power is the orientation towards majorities among the population. This majority rule is not an effective mechanism for establishing a capacity to act and organize if majorities are in a state of constant flux and if existing minorities show little inclination to accept the decisions taken on the basis of orientation towards majorities. These two factors imply that the very openness of the decision maker towards the citizen limits his capacity to make decisions. The well-known problem in democratic theory of the precarious relationship between the responsiveness and effectiveness of the political system would then once again be on the agenda in a relatively drastic form. An overall paradoxical situation could develop. The fragmentation of citizens' interests and demands is only a symptom of a more fundamental societal process of disintegration. This intra-societal development has been compounded by the elimination of the East-West conflict as an integrating mechanism operating on Western societies from without. Such disintegration generates uncertainty among citizens, entailing the expectation that politics will reduce uncertainty by taking decisive action (see also Kleinert 1992). The paradox is that the fragmented citizen can himself be regarded as one of the causes of the reduction in the capacity of political system agents to act. It is argued that there is a discrepancy between the citizens' general expectation that action should be taken and their widely differing ideas about *where* and *how* this should be done. Current criticism of the 'political caste' glosses over this inconsistency. It constructs the fiction of a collectivity of *the* citizens, whose interest are no longer addressed by *the* 'political caste'.

This desire for more effective politics is also the point of departure for current diagnoses by politicians themselves. Biedenkopf (1989) and especially

Weizäcker (Hofmann and Perger 1992) are the most prominent contributors. Their criticism is sparked off primarily by the neglect of long-term societal interests in favour of the short-term interests of the citizen. Various forms of environmental destruction are cited as examples of such neglect, problems that Inglehart assigns to the domain of postmaterialist orientations. Their response to the problem of the relatively high degree of responsiveness to *actual* current demands and the relatively low degree of responsiveness to *potential* future demands is basically only a moralizing one, branding the responsiveness of the political system towards the *specific* current demands of the citizen as survey democracy (alternative but essentially comparable terms in use are 'mood democracy' 'media democracy' or 'populist adjustment'). But the question is one that democratic theory has difficulty in answering, namely how citizens' long-term interests are to be asserted and implemented if necessary even *against* their short-term interests (i.e., against their current interests). Moreover, it would be necessary to offer institutional alternatives to competitive party system mechanisms that make it possible in the first place systematically to take such long-term interests into account from a *structural* point of view.

At this point let us summarize and generalize the outlined theoretical diagnoses from the point of view of structurally determined closure towards societal demands. The hypothesis of structurally determined closure presents three dimensions:

1. In the material dimension it refers to the systematic exclusion of certain types of interest (e.g., postmaterialist interests).
2. In the social dimension it refers to the systematic exclusion of the interests of certain social groups (e.g., socially weaker groups).
3. In the time dimension it refers to the systematic exclusion of future interests as opposed to present ones (e.g. environmental issues).

In so far as such systematic exclusion occurs, one can speak of deficiencies in the democratic process. If such systematic exclusion is attributable to political system structures, then from the democratic theory perspective we must ask what concrete structures entail what exclusion effects in the democratic process - a question that must be answered empirically. The envisaged metatheory of

the democratic process is intended to contribute to the theoretical preconditions for such empirical analysis.

In outlining the theoretical diagnoses, we have touched on a problem that we must now raise to a more abstract conceptual level. If we assume that citizens' demands are either differentiated or fragmented, the result is a greater variety and a greater variability of demands. The actors of the political decision-making system find it correspondingly more difficult to identify the demands that really represent the 'will' of the citizen at any given moment (in the electoral campaign phase) and in the medium term (in relation to the whole legislative period). The same general causes for this development among citizens results in an increase in instrumental rationality among the actors in the political decision-making system (especially among the political parties) that primarily obeys the functional logic of the political system (occupation of decision-making positions by winning elections)⁵. In the context of this rationality, political goals take on the character of means to this end i.e., they are primarily formulated in opportunistic adjustment to the presumed demands of the voter. For the voter this brings uncertainty about what the political parties really want and what they will in fact do. The problem of *double contingency* (Parsons 1951, 1968) thus arises in the relationship between citizens and political parties i.e., each of the two actors makes his conduct contingent on the conduct of the other, which in both cases is extremely unpredictable. Luhmann (1984, 152) provides a succinct definition of contingency: 'A thing is contingent if it is neither necessary nor impossible'. If the interacting agents are to act contingently⁶, the question is how democratic processes are to be described under this condition and how the political structures would have to be constituted if they are to be in a position to absorb as much contingency as

5 Within the framework of systems theory oriented modernization theories, the general causes are seen as being the progressive secularisation of culture and the differentiation of structure (Almond and Powell 1978; Willke 1992). More concrete forms in which these processes manifest themselves are discussed in Beck (1986), Zapf (1987), and Crook, Pakulski and Waters (1992).

6 Each of the actors could act differently and is aware that the other could do likewise, and each knows that the other is also aware of this (Luhmann 1984, 165).

possible. In the face of the contingency problem, Willke (1992, 36) concludes that for theoretical purposes it is imperative to include the 'role of contingency in the operational mode of complex social systems' in any theory of the political system in modern societies. Willke regards this as being particularly ineluctable for societies that, in postindustrialism or postmodernization theories for example, have attained a level of modernity that generates 'an unusual degree of contingency' (Luhmann 1992, 93). In our metatheory of the democratic process we will be constantly returning to this contingency problem to ensure that it is taken into account even at the model level in our theory of the democratic process. It is assumed on the one hand that contingency is a fundamental problem for the political structures of all modern societies, and on the other that structural variation vitally influences the capacity to absorb contingency.

This brief outline of theoretical diagnoses has been intended to indicate the scope of the general issue of the capacity of the political institutions in modern societies to deal with problems. The institutional arrangements in these societies can be described at an abstract level as those of *liberal democracy* (Barber 1984, Held 1987). This is an alternative term to *representative democracy*, which contains reference to a central structural aspect of the political arrangements. For this reason, critical diagnoses are generally formulated as diagnoses of deficiencies in the democratic process controlled by the structures of this type of democracy (liberal or representative democracy). Phenomena such as the increasing proportion of non-voters, the growing dissatisfaction with the established political parties, the rise of new right-wing and regional parties, increasing dissatisfaction with the democratic process as a whole, the growth of political protest etc., are often cited as manifestations of this deficiency. The trouble with such evidence is that it is used almost entirely to illustrate a theoretical hypothesis, and also that it is cited selectively. However, comparative studies show that these phenomena affect only some Western countries, and do so to a widely differing degree (Klingemann and Fuchs). Even if one assumes that these phenomena are manifestations of a deficiency in the democratic process (which is to some extent open to question), these empirical

discrepancies show that the degree of deficiency varies greatly among the Western countries. This circumstance points to the importance of drawing distinctions within the general category of liberal democracy. We will be dealing with this aspect at a later stage.

The general issue of the ability of political institutions to process and perceive problems due to societal change can, on the basis of the theoretical diagnoses discussed above, be formulated in three concrete questions:

1. On the degree of the systematic exclusion of interests (differentiated into the material, social, and time dimensions),
2. On the capacity for the absorption of contingency:
3. On the type and gravity of the consequences of points 1 and 2 for the attitudes and conduct of the citizens⁷.

Further concrete questions could certainly be formulated, but we can assume that these three are the most important ones in the current discussion on the quality of the democratic process in liberal democracies. The empirical analysis of such questions presupposes the empirical reconstruction of the democratic process. This involves two types of description. If we may anticipate our argument with the general premise that the democratic process is an orderly sequence of clearly distinct phases determined by the structures of the political system, the first task is empirically to describe the individual phases as such, and the second to ascertain the relations between these phases. The first type of description includes, for example, empirically ascertaining the concrete demands addressed by the citizen to the political system, or empirically recording the concrete decisions reached by the political system. The second type of description has been provided paradigmatically by a research project that examines the extent to which political party platforms predict governmental action in ten Western countries (Klingemann, Hofferbert and Budge). Other sections of the process could and should be analysed in the same

⁷ To posit this as an additional question is naturally only meaningful if we assume that the relation between 1 and 2 on the one hand and 3 on the other is non-deterministic.

manner to discover, for example, the extent to which party platforms are determined by public demand.

Once the democratic process has been described and reconstructed, the question of explaining the empirically recorded variations in individual countries can be investigated. There is a long-standing controversy in the social sciences on what factors are to be regarded in the final instance as being relevant in causing political phenomena. Are they to be attributed to societal factors or rather to factors endogenous to the political system itself (see Sartori 1969; Easton 1990)? We agree with Sartori and Easton that factors endogenous to the political system exert an independent influence on political phenomena. Within our present context this means explaining empirical variations at the process level by means of empirical variations at the structural level. One example for such an explanatory strategy is to attribute differences in the transformation of voter demands into governmental action in different democracies to differences in the structures of the party systems in these democracies. Such analyses can be carried out only if the relevant data for a number of countries are available, which must furthermore be so similar that a comparative analysis is meaningful in the first place. These two criteria are met in the case of the OECD countries. The OECD was founded in 1961, and since 1973 has had 24 full members. One consequence of membership of relevance for our research purposes is that numerous economic and political macrodata are available on all member countries. Moreover, the countries in question share two characteristics 'that clearly identify them as belonging to one category of country. They have capitalist and relatively developed economies (with a consequent relatively high standard of living), and their political systems are liberal-pluralist or competitive' (Nohlen 1983, 13). Within the context of our inquiry this means that the search for functional equivalence between political structures is limited to functional equivalence *within* the system of liberal or representative democracy. We would not go as far as Fukuyama (1992), who claims that the collapse of the socialist countries also implies the end of history. But it is true that this collapse also means the end of an existing and thus in principle realizable alternative to representative democracy. A narrowing down

of the perspective to functional equivalence *within* representative democracies and not *to* representative democracies is thus initially justified. Even such critical analyses as those of Rödel, Frankenberg and Dubiel (1989) take the liberal democracies in their own fashion as their point of departure in that, while putting the democratic question, they nevertheless take representative democracy as the institutional framework within which this question can meaningfully be put. Precisely because of the collapse of the socialist regimes it is no longer possible to legitimize all forms of liberal democracy with reference to the worse alternative system. The perspective shifts to a comparison of differing structural arrangements of liberal democracies as a general category of political system.

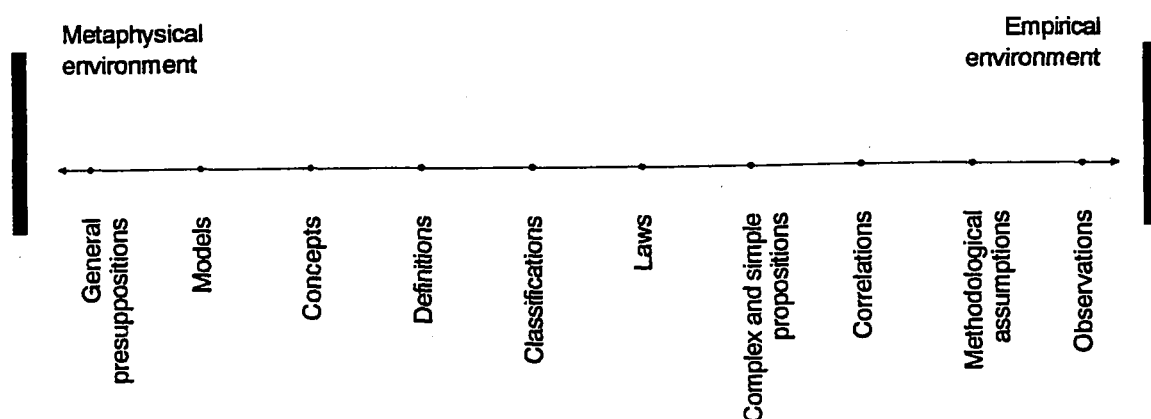
Indicating the context to which the metatheory of the democratic process is to relate says nothing about the nature and the status of this metatheory itself. The empirical *reconstruction* of the democratic process in the OECD countries and the *explanation* of empirically recorded differences at the process level requires such a metatheory. The metatheory is thus merely one (not the only) theoretical *precondition* for such empirical analysis. It has two fundamental components. First a *model of the democratic process*⁸ that is valid for all OECD countries and permits the empirical reconstruction of the processes in individual countries in the first place. Second, a *concept of political structures* on the basis of which concrete structures can be determined empirically. Restricting the purview of the envisaged metatheory with its two components to the OECD countries, that is to say to liberal democracies, limits its scope. It is thus to be distinguished from the universal metatheories of the *political process* such as that of Easton (1965).

8 To speak of a democratic process is naturally only meaningful in relation to this general model. At the empirical level a *number* of democratic processes is likely to be identifiable, which in their turn have common and differing structural features.

2. The Concept of Metatheory and Metatheoretical Presuppositions

In a recent volume, Ritzer (1992, 7) refers to an explosion of interest in sociological metatheory over the past few years. Ritzer defines metatheory (1992, 7) in general as 'the systematic study of the underlying structure of sociological theory'. This can mean many things, as the contributions to Ritzer's volume show. Our concern is the manner in which Lehmann (1988) introduced metatheory into political science for the purpose of developing a model of the polity (we do not refer to the model itself). Lehmann takes Alexander's (1982) 'scientific continuum and its components' as his point of departure. The basic idea is that empirical facts can be generated and then interpreted only if one has a frame of reference, which can be labelled 'meta-theory'. The 'meta' concept is appropriate, since theories in the sense of Popper consist of hypotheses in the form of if...then conjectural statements that can be tested empirically. However, Alexander believes that the specification of such hypotheses depends on prerequisites not amenable to empirical testing, or only to a limited degree. These prerequisites implicitly accompany all empirical research, and must be made explicit if the implications of the scientific undertaking are to be assessed. Alexander (1982, 3) proposes, as a sort of meta-metatheory, his continuum running between the two poles of the 'metaphysical environment' and the 'empirical environment' of scientific inquiry (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: The Scientific Continuum and its Components



Source: Alexander (1982, S.3)

Alexander's conceptualization of scientific inquiry as a continuum⁹ between these two poles has certain advantages over and beyond its intellectual elegance. First the polar opposition of theory and empirical investigation is breached, and second the significance and salience of the individual components of the continuum are elucidated by being placed in one dimension and thus becoming mutually explicable. At this stage, however, we will not examine the whole continuum but will concentrate on the components that can clearly be considered metatheory, namely 'presuppositions' and 'models' (Lehmann 1988, 809). The metatheory of the democratic process refers principally to these two components, although at certain points there is a shift to components closer to the 'empirical environment', such as 'complex and simple propositions' and 'observations'. As the term 'general presuppositions' indicates, they relate to general and unavoidable basic choices that control further theory formation. Models, by contrast, consist of 'a logically ordered set of concepts that highlights the key features of the subject matter of a scientific discipline' (Lehmann 1988, 809). This brief definition of the two metatheoretical components clearly indicates that metatheory as understood by Alexander and Lehmann is neither theory of theory nor a general reflection on theory formation (on the later aspect see Coleman 1990, 1-23). The 'meta' element merely indicates that it goes beyond theory in Popper's sense, which would have to be assigned to 'laws' on Alexander's continuum.¹⁰

Having elucidated what we mean by metatheory, we can now seek to establish what criteria a good metatheory requires and how these are to be met for specific subject matters. Alexander proposes two fundamental criteria for an adequate metatheory, parsimony and multidimensionality (see also Lehmann 1988, 409 et seq.). While the criterion of parsimony is a generally accepted theory formation criterion in the theory of science, the criterion of multidimensionality is not immediately evident, especially as it appears to be in

9 It is not in fact a continuum but a sequence of clearly defined components between the two poles.

10 In systems theory terms the proposed metatheory of the democratic process would be a general theory of the democratic process in liberal or representative democracies.

contradiction to parsimony. In effect Alexander sees it as limiting the parsimony criterion. Although metatheory ought to be formulated as economically as possible, it must avoid biased a priori conjecture on empirical reality. This openness of simple presuppositions towards complex empirical reality can be described as (potential) multidimensionality. Alexander's criterion of multidimensionality also implies a bidirectional flow of inquiry, i.e., from the metaphysical pole of the continuum towards the empirical pole and vice versa. This means not only that empirical research is carried out on a metatheoretical basis, but that metatheoretical reflection is in its turn reformulated in the light of the results obtained by empirical research. A precondition for this permanent feedback process is that more concrete levels (more concrete in the sense of being closer to the 'empirical environment' pole) are seen as specifying more general concepts. Only then can systematic reference be made from the more concrete levels to the more general ones. Among other things, this implies that the metatheory should be elaborated from the outset with a view to being to some extent able stringently to control empirical research, or as Lehmann (1988, 810) puts it, 'Metatheory then consists of presuppositions and models. It constitutes a framework that permits the formulation and testing of "decisive" hypotheses. Presuppositions and models are more scientific when they successfully balance the needs of parsimony and multidimensionality.'

According to Alexander (1982, 37), acceptable theoretical presuppositions must be not only general in nature but also decisive. Presuppositions are decisive when they are nontrivial with regard to significant scientific problems in the subject matter under investigation. In sociological research Alexander (1982, 40) situates two fundamental issues at the presupposition level, that of action and that of order. We will attempt to address these two aspects in our context, and to render them somewhat more concrete. Alexander understands the term 'action' fully in the axiomatic sociological sense of the most elementary form of social behaviour. His definition is akin to Parson's classical definition of action as the realization of intentions in situations, which in its turn is based on older classical definitions. We shall reformulate these definitions to a certain extent,

describing action as the making (and implementing) of rational choices by actors (individual and collective) within the scope of situational and structural constraints. This definition of action culled from the rational choice paradigm (see March 1978, Elster 1986, Wiesenthal 1987) has the advantage on the one hand of being very *simple*, and on the other of being amenable to successful adaptation by scientific research in a *variety* of fields of action. It thus meets the criteria of parsimony and multidimensionality. One of the consequences of this multifarious adaptability is that progressive approximation to reality can be achieved without parsimony being lost. The originally very restrictive economics concept of rational choice was unable to do this. Our definition thus satisfies the criteria of parsimony and multidimensionality. The restrictiveness of classical economics rational choice theory relates primarily to the assumptions that actors are subject to no cognitive and informational limits in their rational calculation of options, and that this rational calculation is controlled by the principle of utility optimization. Both assumptions have since been abandoned in a number of rational choice theories. It is now assumed that the search for and selection of options in attaining goals is made on a limited and uncertain informational basis, and that an option is chosen that has an acceptable utility for the actor ('satisficing') and not necessarily optimum utility ('optimizing')¹¹. This development had already been addressed by Downs (1957) and Simons (1957), who discussed the problems of information uncertainty and information costs as well as 'bounded rationality'.

Even if more recent rational choice theories are relatively more reality-centred, the question remains why rational choice is to be used in action theory in the first place¹². Only a relative answer is possible. Rational choice theory has the relatively greatest *potential* among the options available. A deductive procedure

11 On the current discussion on a more 'realistic' rationality concept, see March (1978), Simon (1985), Elster (1986), Wiesenthal (1987), Monroe (1991), Coleman and Fararo (1992). On the rationality concept in the field of political action see Fiorina (1981), Bennett and Salisbury (1987), March and Olsen (1983, 1989) Tsebelis (1990), Popkin (1991), Fuchs and Kühnel (1993).

12 This question is also raised by the objections which persist even if a higher degree of reality-centredness is taken into account. See the contributions in the collections by Monroe (1991) and Coleman and Fararo (1992).

would mean taking general assumptions about the activities of actors as one's starting point, and, in connection with additional assumptions concerning the field in which action is taken, formulating precise prognoses on actors' actual behaviour. These can then be tested empirically. Such potential can, for example, scarcely be postulated for social psychology action theories. As a rule, the latter depend on ex post facto explanation of actual action, since this is psychologically overdetermined (Bennett and Salisbury 1987, 5 et seq.). However, the extent to which the potentiality of a deductive explanatory strategy exists in the face of a concept of rationality less restrictive than that provided by classical rational choice theory is an issue still to be settled both theoretically and empirically. In view of the alternatives (such as social psychology action theories, or theories of symbolic interactionism), we nevertheless assume that it is only rational choice theory that provides the *opportunity* to generalize hypotheses and specify empirically fertile prognoses. This is particularly true if the relevant actors are also, *or primarily*, collective actors, as is the case in the metatheory of the democratic process. For example, psychological explanations for action are not very plausible in the case of collective actors. Moreover, the fundamental rational choice theory distinction between 'choices' and 'constraints' provides a systematic link to systems theory. This is necessary if the nature of 'constraints' is to be explicated more precisely than is possible within the framework of rational choice theory.

This brings us to the second problem that, according to Alexander, the presuppositions of all sociological investigation should take into account, the problem of *order*. We feel that this question cannot be raised and answered at the action level alone. Although it is addressed in the rational choice paradigm by the concept of 'constraints', what constitutes 'constraints' in any given instance cannot adequately be determined at the action level. In the following chapters we shall be returning to the question of what we mean by constraints and to the relationship between constraints and choices. But first let us summarize what we have dealt with so far. The subject matter of our inquiry is the democratic process. In our definition of action we have established a presupposition that anticipates another with respect to our subject. The

democratic process is understood as interaction among agents acting rationally within the bounds of structural constraints in order to realize their intentions. Our metatheory will analyse the democratic process and related structural constraints with reference to systems theory categories. On the basis of the presuppositions discussed we will be attempting to outline various elements of a metatheory of the democratic political process. This will primarily take the form of a systems theory model of this process and the development of a structure concept permitting a more precise definition of the constraints on the actions of the actors who carry this democratic political process. Since the envisaged metatheory is to provide as systematic a linkage between action theory and systems theory as possible, we shall begin with an at least summary account of the current confrontation of the two paradigms. Further metatheoretical presuppositions will be introduced within the framework of this discussion.

3. Systems Theory and Action Theory

The controversy between the two major paradigms of social scientific theory formation, between systems theory and action theory (or actor theory) seems to come in waves, each paradigm in turn gaining the upper hand (Schimank 1988, 619). We begin with a brief account of criticism levelled at the two paradigms. Our point of reference for systems theory is functionalist systems theory, our point of reference for action theory being the rational choice theory we have already discussed. Our guiding perspective is the assumption that a metatheory of the democratic process must take both paradigms into account. The criticism of systems theory relevant in this perspective comes under the heading 'lack of actor reference' (Schimank 1985), while relevant criticism of action theory can, to vary Schimank's term, be entitled 'lack of system reference'.

Functionalist systems theory, the most celebrated version of which has been provided by Parsons, takes the functional requirements for sustaining a social system as its point of departure in theory formation. Social interactions are analysed from the point of view of these functions. Older criticism of functionalist systems theory objected that functional requirements were neither *a priori*, nor scientifically observable (Nagel 1956, Hempel 1959; see also Wiswede/Kutsch 1978). These authors together with Giddens at a later date (1976) consequently banned functional requirements to the realm of metaphysics and excluded them from the *social-scientific* discourse. If one remains within the framework of the empirically-oriented concept of science that underlies this conclusion, a proposal by Mayntz (1988) could permit the function concept to be retained while at the same time making it amenable to empirical inquiry. She suggests defining the function concept without having recourse to *a priori* and/or universal functional requirements. Drawing a functional distinction between a subsystem and the overall societal context of action can succeed only if both the actors within this subsystem and its relevant environment perceive and recognize the functional specificity of the subsystem. This function concept is directly compatible with Alexander's 'scientific continuum'. As a concept it belongs to metatheory, but it is formulated in such a

way that it can guide empirical inquiry and be modified in its concrete content by the outcomes of empirical research.

More recent criticism of the lack of actor-reference has been put forward by numerous researchers, including of course the adherents of the action theory paradigm. However, we will concern ourselves especially with authors who either acknowledge their adherence to the systems theory paradigm or make use of aspects of it in their own work (Mouzelis 1974, Rueschemeyer 1977, Crozier and Friedberg 1990, Schimank 1985, 1988, Mayntz 1988a, Easton 1990). Immanent criticism of a theoretical paradigm frequently contributes more to its further development than criticism from the perspective of alternative paradigms.

Criticism of the lack of actor-reference in systems theory unfolds on two successive levels. The first of these is that of the theory's explanatory deficiency. With regard to Parson's statements on social differentiation, Schimank (1985, 425), for example, objects that one is always asking 'why does that happen?'. When explaining evolutionary processes, Parsons (1971) has recourse to such highly abstract mechanisms as inclusion, value generalization, differentiation and adaptive upgrading. But the explanatory nature of these mechanisms remains unclear. They seem to be part of the phenomenon rather than an explanation of it. The second level of criticism addresses the relevance of actors when they occur within the framework of systems theory analyses. Mouzelis (1974, 426 et seq.) complains, for example, that Smelser (1959) mentions collective actors but attributes no independent significance to them (i.e., they do not truly act) because their actions are fully *determined* by the system and are thus mere products of it. Schimank (1985, 427) follows up this criticism and introduces the distinction between social systems that *determine action* and such that are *capable of action*. The latter appear to be largely synonymous with collective actors given the status of subsystems within more comprehensive systems. We feel that it is only from this point of view that Schimank's distinction becomes plausible.

Crozier and Friedberg (1980) have devoted a monograph to this problem of actors and systems. Their starting point is a certain concept of the relationship between systems and actors. On this basis they elaborate a theory of collective action in organizations as a specific form of social system. We do not intend to go into the theory in greater detail at this point, since it sets off in a direction different from the one we are taking. What is interesting for our purposes, however, is the definition of the relations between systems and actors. According to Crozier and Friedberg (1980, 45), the idea of action being *determined* by systems is inappropriate. 'A given organizational situation never completely constrains an actor. He always retains a margin of liberty and negotiation.' In pursuing his own strategies, every actor attempts to retain this margin and to extend it, if only *because* it permits him better to implement his strategies. However, extending the margin of liberty means reducing dependence on others. Since all actors attempt to obtain more leeway, the question arises whether the system - or in the case of Crozier and Friedberg the organization - can survive. Crozier and Friedberg (1990, 52) seek to solve this problem by attributing to rationally acting agents an interest in sustaining the conditions that must prevail if interrelated interactions are to occur at all. These conditions consist of a more or less extensive set of 'rules of the game' that have to be accepted by the interacting agents, thus limiting their choices while not completely determining them. Taking a completely different systems theory approach, Easton (1965) comes to a comparable conclusion. He sees the condition for a functioning political process as being the existence of a sufficient degree of generalized support for the regime, which he also sees as being defined by, among other things, the 'rules of the game'.

In his latest theoretical study, Easton deals explicitly with the relationship between actors and system, and, as in rational choice theory, defines this relationship in terms of constraints and choices: '...a constraint is a limit on the variety of choices open to an individual or collectivity. It is a condition that reduces choices from infinity to some finite number. The smaller the number of choices the greater the constraint' (Easton 1990, 25). Thus Easton also takes up the idea that the action of individual and collective actors is constrained by

systems, and that, despite these constraints, their action is not determined but that they are offered choices. In discussing the systemic constraints on actors, Easton makes a simple but far-reaching specification. It is not so much the systems themselves that limit the action of individuals and collectivities as the *structures* of these systems (Easton 1990, 55). It is only this specification that allows us theoretically to explain and empirically to demonstrate how constraints systematically affect the action of actors. For this reason a discussion of a structure concept must be included in the envisaged metatheory.

If action is influenced and controlled in the manner described by systemic structures notwithstanding the existence of more or less extensive 'zones of freedom' for rationally acting agents in the sense of Crozier and Friedberg and of Easton, action always reproduces a structure, provided that the choices open to this action remain within the scope of the given structures. But it can lead to these structures being modified, first by conscious nonacceptance of the rules of the game (which means that choices are extended to structures), and second by the unintentional cumulative effects of action that basically occurs within the given structures (e.g., due to contradictions in structural terms of reference). In this sense action is also *structuring* (Giddens 1984). In contrast to older 'actorless' systems theory, such a concept of the relation between systems and actors permits analyses of *how* stabilization and change comes about in given systems without the necessity of having recourse to opaque self-regulatory mechanisms.

Systems theory can justifiably be accused of a 'lack of actor-reference'. Complementary criticism of action theory (in the form of rational choice theory) has claimed to discern a 'lack of system-reference'. Action theoreticians themselves formulate this criticism, albeit in different terms. Heiner (1983, 1985) argues that actors can act rationally only if there is a limited range of options. Only within such limits can a comparison from certain points of view be effected. Wiesenthal (1987, 435) points to another aspect of rational action. If rational action is primarily oriented towards the outcomes of actions, it presupposes that such outcomes can be expected with a minimum of probability. The *precondition* of rational action is accordingly the existence of

constraints. For this reason, concrete constraints cannot be treated as extraneous to theory when it comes to explaining and prognosticating the actions of agents as is done in rational choice theory. March and Olsen (1983, 1989) and Shepsle (1989) have come to similar conclusions¹³. The necessity of systematically including constraints in explanatory strategy is demonstrated by two exemplary analyses carried out within the framework of the rational choice paradigm, the classical analysis by Downs (1957) and a recent one by Strom (1990). It is only *because* these analyses provide precise explication of constraints that they prove convincing. They implicitly compensate the lack of system-reference with the introduction of systemic constraints, introduced, however, without systematic theoretical endeavour of their own.

The meaning of a 'lack of system-reference' has been addressed in greater detail by Münch (1983) and Schimank (1985, 1988). Münch shows once again that, from the outset, the action theory approach is (because of its own premises) directed towards situations that offer actors various and limited options. This tacitly presupposes what has been described as the precondition for rational action, which Münch (1983, 52) defines as stable common rules and norms of behaviour. Schimank (1988, 622) uses the term 'suprasituational, generalized action orientations'. These *generalized action orientations* in particular constitute social systems, imposing constraints on actors' activities in two ways. The first issue is the system in which action occurs *in the first place*. This already circumscribes the space for possible actions and excludes others. If, for example, an actor wishes to attain goals in the economic system, he must act economically and not, for example, culturally or politically¹⁴. Once it has been settled in which system the action is taking place, the question of options for action *within* this system must be dealt with. These options are defined by the structures of the social system concerned and by its subsystems. We are thus dealing with a generalized action orientation at a lower level of generalization

13 For this reason these authors demand that institutions be included in the rational choice approach. However, we believe not only that this postulate ought to be implemented in the theoretical context, but that it also requires taking systems theory categories into account.

14 If he does not select any economic action, he generates no resonance in the economic system. This means that he is unable to attain any goals in this system.

than the one mentioned above. Both action orientations can be described as generalized in so far as they apply for all actors and constitute the precondition for choice. Choice involves the actor concerned exercising his preference in selecting one of the given options. In this sense choice can be regarded as a *specific action orientation*¹⁵. Action theory's lack of system-reference has thus to do with ignoring generalized action orientation in analysing specific action orientation. We will conclude this discussion with an abstract but nevertheless precise definition from Schimank (1985, 428): 'Action is constituted ... by the *intentionality* of social systems capable of action within the scope of the *conditionality* of social systems that determine action'. Social systems that determine action are societal subsystems such as the political system, whereas social systems capable of action are collective actors that act within the framework of this societal subsystem.

15 If we understand the prime distinction in action theory, that between choices and constraints, as a distinction between specific and generalized action meaning, we move in the direction of defining systems as meaning systems as does Luhmann, for example. This provides at least a possibility that action and systems theory can be integrated more systematically than has hitherto been the case.

4. A Model of the Democratic Process

4.1 The Democratic Process as a Sequence of Action Products

According to the metatheoretical frame of reference we have postulated, the precondition for the empirical reconstruction of the democratic process is the development of a *model* of this process valid for all variants of this type of democracy. The variants result from differences in the structural arrangement of the subsystems of liberal democracies in individual countries. On the empirical level these generate differing democratic processes. A model of this type is to be formulated to provide a simplified image of reality in its essential aspects (implicit in the concept of model), while also permitting theoretically significant and empirically testable hypotheses to be detailed. If we agree with Lehmann (1988, 809) that a model consists of a 'logically ordered set of concepts', the task is to show what concepts are to be used to describe the democratic process and what logic the arrangement of these concepts obeys. In elaborating this model our point of departure will be analyses that have been made within the systems theory framework.

In systems theories, too, political processes are understood as a sequence of related *acts* with a certain meaning. By referring to the act as a *political* one, this meaning is merely labelled. Against the background of metatheoretical considerations advanced to date, the content of the concept 'political' cannot be determined only by theoretical definition of functional requirements in the context of societal reproduction, but also by recourse to the perception of the actor himself. A differentiated political system exists to the extent that the actor is in a position to distinguish it from its environment and within its boundaries (Luhmann 1970, 155; Mayntz 1988, 19). The actor's capacity to identify and delimit the political system is on the other hand determined by the degree of differentiation existing at the structural level. In this latter regard at least three analytical levels are discernible, with differing degrees of structural stability, building on one another in differentiating a functional system (see Mayntz 1988, 20 et seq. and Stichweh 1988, 261). The lowest level of individual and

situational acts is succeeded by the level at which special political functional roles develop, to be followed in its turn by the level on which more complex social structures arise through role linkage (either in the form of informal networks of role-actors or in the form of formal organizations that combine the various roles in accordance with a superordinate action goal). If all three levels of system formation develop - and this is the case in the democracies we are looking at - then each level places constraints on what is possible in the way of events and actions at the level beneath. We will be dealing with this when we discuss the concept of structure in Chapter 5. At this point it is important to note that the degree of differentiation of a political system is determined by the complementary relation of the actor's perception and the system's structural consolidation. Luhmann (1970, 155) refers to this complementary relation when he stresses that 'it is only at the role level that differentiation can be carried out clearly so that it is unequivocally recognizable whether or not a role (such as that of civil servant, member of Parliament, party secretary, voter, applicant) has been assigned to the political system'. The more clearly a functional system has been differentiated at the role level, the greater the ease with which actors are able to recognize the system in its boundaries and to assign certain actions to it.

The political process has been defined as a sequence of interrelated *actions*. This immediately raises the question how this action complex is to be recognized as being political and how it is to be distinguished from nonpolitical action. With reference to concepts introduced in the previous chapter, we are thus dealing with a first definition of generalized action meaning in the political system. To determine the special nature of *political* action, we must return to the functional definition of the political system as formulated in practically all important systems theories. The function of the political system is to formulate collective goals and to implement them in the form of collectively binding decisions (see *inter alios* Easton 1965, Parsons 1969, Luhmann 1970, Almond and Powell 1978). The action complex described as political process refers to the realization of this function. In the theories mentioned, this functional definition of the political system was quasi objective. We assume that this definition also serves as a

perception criterion when subjects identify actions as political. We feel that this is a plausible assumption if only *because* the political system is in fact differentiated at the role level¹⁶. As a consequence of this differentiation, political action is above all role action, and every role involves a high degree of definiteness in action meaning. Central among the roles that make it relatively easy to identify actions as political are the ones that, when networked, constitute the collective actors 'government' and 'parliament'. The action of these collective agents shows clearly that we are dealing with collective binding decisions made and implemented with the option of using coercive state powers (see also Parsons 1969, 206 et seq.). Mayntz argues similarly (1988, 22 et seq.), although she refers to the differentiation of social systems as such and not only with respect to the political system. She regards it as an essential differentiation criterion in a social system 'whether and to what extent there are actors who claim self-regulatory competence internally and authority to represent interests externally'. When this stage of differentiation has been attained, such social systems 'are generally perceived by the members of society themselves as autonomous systems, the definition of which poses no real problem'.

The next question to be tackled at the action level is concerned with the *differentiation* of political actions within the scope of this action meaning. How can the sequence of acts or the political process be subdivided into distinct and theoretically meaningful stages? Let us begin by taking a look at answers offered by the systems theories already discussed. Almond and Powell (1978, 1988) attempt such a subdivision by means of a sequence of second-order process functions¹⁷ (second order with regard to the mentioned primary function of the political process). However, we prefer the distinctions proposed

16 In the final instance, of course, it must be empirically established to what extent the citizen is aware of this criterion (however diffuse his knowledge might be), and to what extent he uses it in his cognition of environmental events.

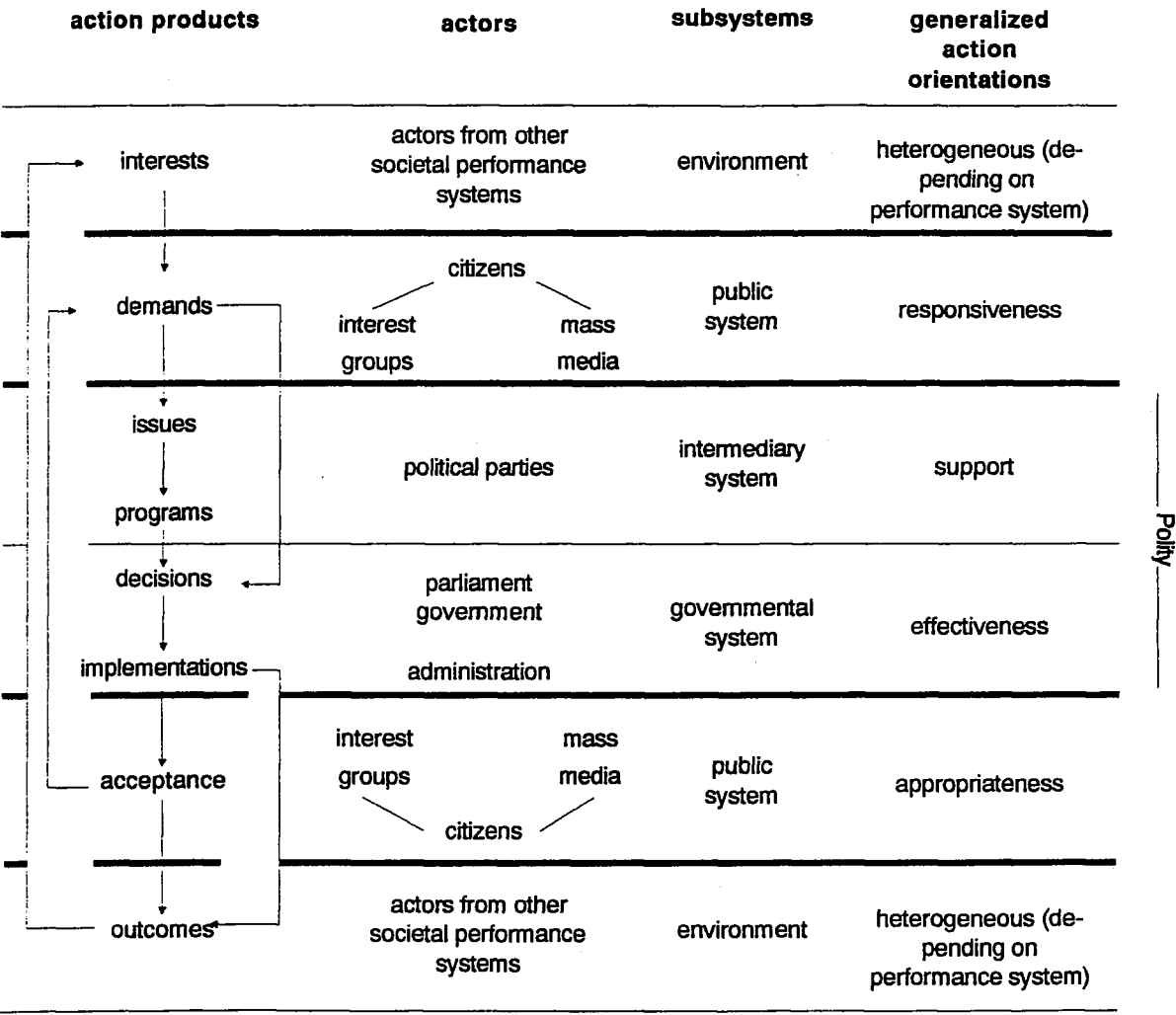
17 The process functions posited by Almond and Powell are interest articulation, interest aggregation, policy making, policy implementation, and policy adjudication. To these are to be added the so-called policy functions, which refer to the output of the process functions, and which are subdivided into extraction, regulation and distribution (Almond and Powell 1988, 9).

by Easton, since we feel they segment the process continuum with greater precision and also permit systematic actor reference as required by our metatheoretical presuppositions. Easton (1965) specifies his process model in two ways. First as a simple, dynamic feedback model, distinguishing only between input, conversion, output and feedback, and second in terms of the content or the material of this process. In this respect Easton distinguishes four qualities: wants, demands, issues, and decisions, which at the same time indicate the sequence of stages in the political process. Easton (1965, 72) also refers to these qualities as products, thus implicitly referring to actors who generate these products. However, in the further treatment of the political process, which he calls 'a systems analysis of political life', these actors have no systematic relevance, since Easton's metatheory is universal i.e., intended to apply to all political systems. The categories of a metatheory of this scope are consequently invariant and can integrate variable factors such as specific types of collective actor only for illustrative purposes. For this reason, according to Easton himself (1990, ix), such a metatheory cannot provide a frame of reference for dealing with questions such as *what* determines the generation of individual products of the political system in concrete political systems, and *how* the transformation of this chain of products is to be understood in detail. The metatheory of the political process which interests us is far more limited in scope. It deals with the representative democracies of Western societies, on which a sufficient number of (systems theory) analyses have been carried out, on the basis of which Easton's process model can be differentiated and concretized.

One of the advantages of this more restricted metatheory is the possibility of relating the various qualities of the political process to *specific* actors, and of understanding them as products of the activities of these actors. For this reason we refer below to the stages of the political process as *action products*. This brings a shift in emphasis. The political process is now determined less by a sequence of interrelated actions of specific actors than by a directed chain of products of the actions of these actors. This shift in emphasis makes it easier to measure the phases of the political process empirically, since products must

materialize in some form or other. It also reflects the fact that political action always has to do with the production of certain performances that are passed on to the environment of the political system. And performances *are* products of the actors' actions. Figure 2 shows the directed chain of action products in detail. The arrow marks the direction of sequence and is also intended to indicate that each stage is influenced by the immediately preceding one. We will be coming back to this influence and to the deviations from the step-by-step exercise of influence. Before we do so, we must explain what is meant by the individual action products.

Figure 2: A Model of the Democratic Process



According to the fundamental democratic norm, the demands of the citizen are the starting point of the democratic process. However, in the process model these demands are preceded by *interests*. Our term 'interest' corresponds to what Easton calls 'wants'. But Easton (1965, 71 et seq.) uses the term 'wants' to refer to a variety of factors that influence demands. Our concept of 'interest', by contrast, is intended to introduce a narrower and more specific meaning. In various manuals the term interest is defined as an intention of utility of a person or a group that is to be realized. (see e.g., Fuchs et al. 1975, 312, Massing 1985, 384; also von Aleman 1987, 29). We will take these definitions as our starting point, giving them a stronger action-theory twist. Interests can accordingly be understood as action goals of individual and collective actors that are of utility to these actors, and which these actors seek to realize within the scope of the situational and structural constraints of social systems. The concept of action products involves two distinct stages in the realization of interests by means of actions undertaken by actors. First the explicit articulation of interests as intentions for actions that require realization, and second the actual realization of these articulated interests¹⁸. The two stages are the outcome of interactions between relevant actors of social systems, and to this extent they are determinable as action products. Interests can, for example, be read and measured in the stage of explicit articulation in the utterances made by representatives of collective actors or in programmatic documents issued by such actors. It is certainly more complicated to register interests in the case of individual actors. Whether the use of elaborated survey techniques could be an adequate recording method is a question to be gone into elsewhere.

Interests seen in relation to the democratic process are actors' action goals that are *potential*, not yet manifest (politicized) demands. They must therefore be assigned to the environment of the political system. But for various reasons

18 The explicit articulation of interests, especially in anticipation of their transformation into demands, is regarded as the first stage towards realization. Certain actors in the democratic process have no possibility of realizing their demands themselves. The citizens, for example, need specialized actors such as parties and government. As a result of the coupling of these actors' decision-making activities with the articulated demands of the citizens brought about by the electoral mechanism, the articulation of demands can already be regarded as intentional action in the sense of goal attainment.

they are components of the model of a democratic process. First, it is a relevant from the point of view of normative democratic theory to ask whether there are certain interests that cannot systematically be transformed into demands, due, for example, to the existence of structurally determined exclusion mechanisms. Second, the outputs of the democratic process (implemented decisions) transmute into new demands not only directly, but frequently only via complex causal sequences that are responsible for generating new interests. These in turn constitute potential inputs to the democratic process. This latter aspect of feedback should not be excluded at least at the model level.

With our definition of interests we have provided a shell for other action products in so far as they, too, are conceived as the outcome of rational action by actors. The difference lies above all in the high degree of determinateness arising from the logic of the democratic process itself. There are two criteria in particular which distinguish *demands* from interests. In the first place, they represent only a selection from the mass of interests, and in the second place they are politicized in the sense that they relate to the expectation (or the demand) that they will be taken into account by the collectively binding decision-making process, and that they will be implemented (see also Easton 1965, 38 et seq.).

In the chain of action products, demands are succeeded by *issues*. These are demands selected by the political parties for their attention. Easton (1965, 128 et seq.) describes this as 'demand reduction' with the function of 'intrasystem gate keeping' to prevent 'demand overload'. Issues are elements of demands taken up by the political parties and turned into the subject matter of their competitions for votes. The qualitative difference between issues and demands lies in proposals put forward by the political parties for the realization of these demands i.e., in *proposed solutions* or *policy alternatives* (see also Easton 1965, 14 et seq., and Almond and Powell 1988, 9). Party platforms make selections from among the mass of issues, establishing relationships between them in the sense of setting up preference hierarchies and scheduling their intentions to tackle the issues selected. Establishing *relationships* in this way can also be described as *aggregation*. Within the category of platforms, it is useful to draw a distinction

between party platforms, election platforms and government programmes, each of which have their own time horizon and, within the democratic process are either 'closer' to the issues or to the decisions.

The action product immediately preceding the decisions is the programme in the form of government programmes. The *decisions* taken in parliaments and in governments are selections from these government programmes that are necessary if only because not everything can be implemented immediately and exactly the way as formulated programmatically. The specific quality of decisions as action products lies on the one hand in the allocation of resources to policy alternatives, which are a fundamental condition for the realization of programmatic goals. On the other hand they lie in the *binding effect* of these decisions on the collectivity of citizens and on the actors from other societal function systems. If the primary function of political action is to bring about collectively binding decisions, then this action product constitutes the heart of the democratic process.

The binding nature of such decisions affects the consequent action products in a variety of ways. Within the governmental system the decisions of the government have to be accepted by the administrative authorities as the premise for action. In producing the specific action products of the administration, referred to as *implementations*, the authorities have no option to follow up some decisions while neglecting others. And this means that no selection from among a number of options takes place. There is only qualitative transformation by specifying premises for a decision in the form of economic and legal *rules of procedure*. It is only this *implemented* decision that can be passed on to the public and society as 'output'.¹⁹

The final action product in the model of the democratic process is the *acceptance* of the implemented decision by the actors in the public system. In this case, too, the binding character of the implemented decisions gives no room for selection, since non-acceptance is - at least officially - not permitted. On the other hand it

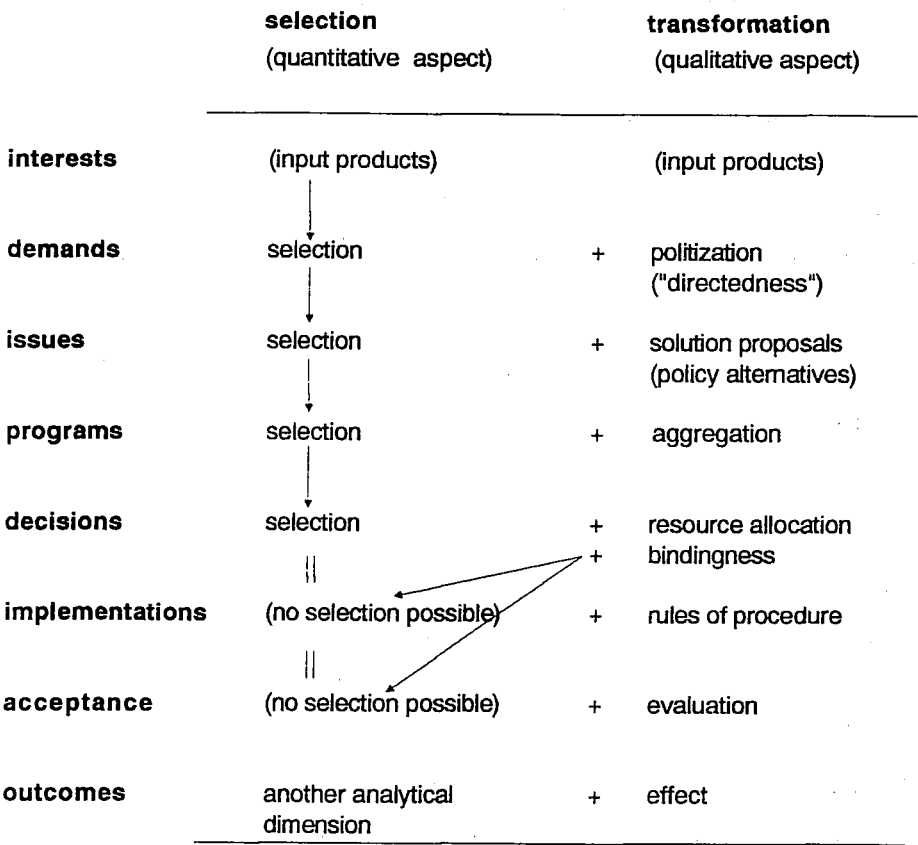
19 Almond and Powell (1978, 15) describe these action products as 'implemented policies'.

is both legal and legitimate to evaluate the implemented decisions differently and to bring the *evaluation* (acceptance) thereof to bear on the formulation of new and different demands at the input end of the democratic process. For the purposes of official power structures, deviations from this type of acceptance of binding decisions are regarded as disturbances that are dysfunctional in the democratic process. We will be returning to this problem at a later stage.

The last of the action products shown in Figure 2 is the *outcomes* in the societal environment of the governmental system's decision-making actions. Although implemented decisions have a greater or lesser effect on the societal environment, the final result is produced only by interaction with impact factors generated by the innate functional logic of societal subsystems to which the implemented decisions relate. What is referred to as outcomes in the process model is largely identical with what Easton (1965, 351) and Almond and Powell 1978, 16, 32-357) also call 'outcomes' (a discussion on the outcome concept is to be found in Roller 1992, 18-22).

Having described the individual action products, we can now summarize and generalize. The democratic process is to be understood as a directed sequence of action products of specific actors. This sequence has two dimensions, the transmission of the selections made by actors and the transformation of these selections by the actors. The transmission of selections is primarily quantitative in nature, since it is a matter of reducing the options on offer at each preceding stage (although in the case of two action products no option is possible in transmitting selections, i.e., the selections made at the preceding stage have to be taken over without further choices). The *transformation* of selections, on the other hand, is qualitative in nature, because each succeeding action product is changed by the additional specification of its quality. In Figure 3 the concrete meanings of the individual action products are shown in the two dimensions mentioned.

Figure 3: Schematic Representation of Action Products



We will now consider in somewhat more detail the control of the directed sequence of action products at a more general level. When we say general, we mean that it is a question of control applicable to all representative democracies. This control is explained by interpreting the democratic process as a power process. In doing so we are returning to considerations that had already been made when describing the action products, seen this time in a different perspective.

The model of the democratic process shown in Figure 2 refers to the *formal* process. The process is formal in the sense that 'the dominant direction of communication is supported by the official power structure' (Luhmann 1970, 165). The official power structure is defined by the constitution and will be referred to in the metatheory under discussion as the formal structure (see

Chapter 5), which in a certain manner controls the course of the political process. Luhmann (1970, 162) defines power as 'the possibility of selecting by one's own decision an alternative for others ... Power always exists when a certain option is selected from range of options by decision, and this selection is adopted by others as the premise for decision-making' (Parsons [1969, 352-404] gives a similar definition of power). The *right* to select an alternative for others that the latter are then *obliged* to adopt as the premise for their actions is a binding provision in the constitutions of Western representative democracies at the crucial nodes in the democratic process. The formal democratic process *as* a power process takes the collectivity of citizens as its starting point. This collectivity is constituted by a multitude of roles, among which the role of voter is the decisive one in setting the flow of power in motion. The specification of the voter role by electoral law in representative democracies is something like the operationalization of popular power at the structural level. This structural component implemented by electoral law exercises a twofold effect in generating power. First the *anticipation* on the part of the political parties of *the vote* to be cast by the citizen. If the occupation of government positions can be assumed to be an interest guiding the actions of political parties (a question we will be coming back to), it is also rational for competing parties to take the demands of the citizens into account in their electoral platforms. To this extent the claims of the citizen are the premises for the action of political parties, and to this extent also a power-controlled transmission of selections takes place. The power-generating effect of electoral law is also produced by the *exercise of the franchise* on the part of the citizen. The effect of this performance is that one or a number of parties are chosen to form the government, and thus the party platforms are established as the premise for government action. This two-stage power process contains two fundamental *uncertainties*, so that the actions of those subject to power is not fully determined by those exercising power. Uncertainty arises in the attempts of the political parties to identify citizen demands²⁰. As attitude research has shown, these demands are neither unambiguous, nor stable or transitive in the sense of motivational hierarchy.

20 To avoid all misunderstanding: in this case those subject to power are the political decision makers, and those exercising power are the citizens.

This either provides the political parties with action space or imposes restrictions on their actions (depending on the point of view taken). Uncertainty also arises in the implementation of the platforms of elected parties in the form of governmental action or decision-making. Governmental action is subject to complex and changing reality restrictions, which if nothing else limit the unimpaired implementation of programmatic projects. This defective implementation could be structurally counteracted by the constitutional introduction of an imperative mandate. However, sustaining the adaptability of governmental action to complex and changing reality restrictions is one of the reasons why the imperative mandate is expressly excluded as a structural element in representative democracies. This type of uncertainty can of course be evaluated in different ways depending on the prevailing democratic norm. But it clearly shows that an empirically ascertained heavy dependence of party platforms on current citizen demands or of governmental decisions on the platforms of governing parties is not to be regarded, in the sense of normative democratic theory, as positive *per se*²¹.

Whereas the power-controlled transmission of selections generates uncertainties and thus action space up to the decision-making stage, the situation changes in the (formal) democratic process from the decision-making stage onward. Decisions are made binding by constitutions, and within the government system this holds true for implementation by the administrative authorities. And outside the government system for acceptance of implemented decisions by the actors of the public system. This has already been discussed when dealing with action products (see also Figure 3). Where the democratic process is conceived of as a power process, the mandatory nature of decisions makes the transmission of the selections made by those in power to those subject to that power an unambiguous process. Whoever is subject to power must accept the selections of those exercising power as the premises for his own action to which no alternative is permitted.

21 Empirically ascertaining how one action product is determined by another can occur, for instance, in the form of prognostication by linear regression. This method has been used in the cited analyses by Klingemann, Hofferbert and Budge, predicting governmental action on the basis of party platforms.

Analysis of the democratic process has hitherto regarded this process as a directed chain of action products of specific collective actors. This sequence of action products has been described in terms of selection and transformation. The aspect that has been neglected is that this selection and transformation occurs within the framework of a differentiation of the political system into subsystems. It is this aspect we wish to address. We will thus turn our attention to the *internal differentiation* of the political system in liberal democracies.

4.2 Internal Differentiation of the Political System

4.2.1 Differentiation into Three Subsystems

A social system is differentiated when there has developed both a specific structure and a generalized action orientation of actors, the networking of whom constitutes the structure. This definition must be applied to the internal differentiation of social systems, which basically obey the same logic of differentiation as that prevailing in the superordinate social system. The discussion on the internal differentiation of the political system will proceed in three steps. We will begin by examining which subsystems are to be differentiated in the first place, will then assign collective actors to these subsystems, and will finally describe the generalized action orientations of the actors in the respective subsystems.

To describe the internal differentiation of the political system, we turn once again to the general function or action orientation of the political system, which consists in the production of collectively binding decisions. The meaning or reference of this general function is, however, subject to historical processes of definition. During the long development and consolidation phase of European nation states, this function manifested itself primarily in persistent political action on the part of rulers to safeguard their power over the nation state. This reproduction consisted essentially in the maintenance (or extension) of territory by stabilizing borders externally and in the administrative penetration of this territory internally. The prerequisite for both types of reproduction of rule over

the nation state is the existence of a power centre with a monopoly of the exercise of power²². This definitional restriction of state action to an interest in self-preservation was abandoned as western European countries develop into welfare states. This development has been described and analysed in detail elsewhere (Flora, Alber and Kohl 1977, Luhmann 1981c, Alber 1982, Roller 1992). It is true that the reproduction of rule did (or could) involve specific performances by the rulers for society, such as the safeguarding of peace externally and the establishment of order internally. However, as the welfare state developed, these core political functions provide only the basis for a growing allocation of tasks to the state, or of expectations of performance by the state (Mayntz 1988, 39). A clear exchange relationship arose only with this catalogue of welfare state tasks. Those exercising power provide society with the welfare performances expected by society, and receive in return tax revenue and generalized support. This exchange relationship marks the political system as a performance system. A current example of how welfare state development dynamics still functions is the discussion in Germany on whether it is advisable to entrench state goals in the constitution (see Luhmann 1981 on the *logic* of welfare state development). Regardless of whether this occurs, the discussion alone reflects what relevant social groups expect from the action of the state. Whether the attempt to abate these expectations and to impose new limits on state action - such as occurred in Britain in the eighties - can be successful in the long term, or whether it must fail due to more deep-seated structural development trends in modern societies, can at this point be mentioned only in passing as a significant problem.

Differentiating a social system on the basis of performance has to do with differentiating 'clearly defined producer and acceptor roles' in relation to performance (Mayntz 1988, 19). The specific configuration of producer roles is a structural characteristic of the governmental system and the specific configuration of acceptor roles is a structural characteristic of the public system. The term 'public' is taken from Luhmann (1970, 163) and Parsons (1969, 208),

22 See Flora (1983) on the coming into being and consolidation of the European nation states.

while that of 'governmental system' from Parsons alone (1969, 207, 312)²³. Instead of governmental system, Luhmann refers to 'bureaucratic administration'. However, if one of the collective actors of the 'decision-making system' is to be serve to denote the system as a whole, we find Parson's concept the more plausible one, since in the last instance it is government and parliament that produce binding decisions, whereas the bureaucratic administration is specialized in elaborating the adopted decision premises. Regardless of the terms used, distinguishing a 'production system' for performances (governmental system) and an 'acceptor system' for performances (public system) is the fundamental distinction made by practically all systems theories of politics.

The interactions between producers and acceptors in performance systems are exchange processes of performance and counter-performance. In most systems theories of politics, this exchange relationship is drawn out in content and time. The governmental system provides binding decisions of a certain type at the output end (see Parsons 1969, 209). In negative cases a withdrawal of support occurs at the input end on the occasion of the next election. The background to this stretching of the exchange relationship is the assumption that in making decisions a political system can 'adjust to fluctuating societal problem situations' only if an 'almost motiveless, self-evident acceptance of binding decisions occurs' (Luhmann 1970, 159). If we take this premise as our point of departure, it is sufficient to have political process models terminate with the implemented decisions passed on to the environment without further analysing either transmission or acceptance. Transmission to the environment is generally referred to by the unspecific term 'outputs'. At this point we will not discuss whether the motiveless acceptance of implemented decisions by the acceptor really is a functional condition of the political system, but will adopt the plausible postulate that this is in fact no longer the case²⁴. In the model of the democratic process we have already presented (see Figure 2), we therefore take

23 Parson's exact terms for the two subsystems are 'public' and 'government'.

24 This assumption is, of course, also to be understood as a metatheoretical 'jumping the gun', which as a verifiable hypothesis can be investigated empirically.

up Luhmann's idea of differentiating the roles of the public system into roles that are to be assigned to either the input end or the output end of the polity (Luhmann 1970, 164 et seq.). In contrast to Luhmann, we suspect that there are exchange relations between the polity and the public system not only at the input end of the democratic process, but also at the output end. The acceptance of implemented decisions is not already unambiguously determined by the binding nature of these decisions. It is a factor that is variable within certain limits, and which is also influenced by the public's evaluation of these implemented decisions. A nuclear power station or a motorway through a nature reserve, for example, will not necessarily be constructed only because this has been resolved in the polity's legal decision-making process. The extent to which the public accepts implemented decisions is likely in its turn to affect the outcomes of policy planning, in energy policy or transport policy, for example²⁵. At a more general level the conditional acceptance of the polity's implemented decisions by the public can be described with the aid of Parson's distinction between power-based and influence-based communication processes (1969, 410 et seq.; on this distinction see also Gerhards 1993, 30 et seq.), and thus pin-pointed with greater conceptual precision. A power-based transmission of selections (implemented decisions) would mean unquestioning acceptance of these selections by the public. The motive for acceptance would then primarily be the possibility of taking negative sanctions including coercive measures (supported by the state monopoly of power). The motive for acceptance in the case of influence-based transmission of selections is, by contrast, to be found in the extent of the persuasive force that actor x exercises on actor y. If our hypothesis of conditional acceptance of the polity's implemented decisions by the public is tenable, then the public system has succeeded in establishing communication with the polity at the output end of the democratic process largely on the basis of influence, and in persuading the polity to waive force as a medium of communication. However, this presents the polity with the problem that the output end of the democratic process also becomes contingent. One possible way to react structurally to this increase in

25 This effect is taken into account in the chain of action products in the model of the democratic process (see Figure 2).

contingency would be to draw a distinction between special functional roles to mobilize support for decisions already implemented. The establishment of public relations departments in the various administrative bodies can be interpreted as characteristic of this 'form of adaptation'.

In contrast to the output end of the political process²⁶, the input end has seen a specialized subsystem develop to mediate between the public system and the governmental system. In view of its nature we refer to it as an *intermediation system*. In the coming chapters we will attempt to elucidate the precise nature or logic of this intermediation. The intermediation system is essentially the same as Luhmann's 'party politics' (1970, 163). Luhmann sees the function of this subsystem as arising from the political system's fundamental openness to societal topics and problems requiring collectively binding decisions. As a result, according to Luhmann, mobilizing political support for governmental system action becomes a permanent necessity for the maintenance of the polity. The structure within which mobilization takes place is the regulated competition between parties for the voter's favour. The vote itself is thus the manifest form of mobilized support. Luhmann claims that the primary sense of this distinct function of the intermediation system is to discharge the governmental system from the job of mobilizing support. It is only this relief that permits the governmental system to concentrate on the 'elaboration and issuance of binding decisions' (Luhmann 1970, 164) pursuant to the programmatic premises for which support has been mobilized by the intermediation system (see also Parsons 1969, 208 et seq.). Exercising the functions of the intermediation system also involves selecting and transforming public demands (see Figure 3), a prerequisite for the effective processing of public demands by governmental system decision-making.

26 A different approach would be to differentiate the administration into government departmental bureaucracy and local administration. The latter could then be claimed to fulfil an intermediation function between the governmental system and the public system at the output end. However, we feel that this differentiation cannot be made with such clarity as to permit two distinct systems within the administration to be postulated. An alternative would be differentiation into government departmental bureaucracy and local bureaucracies as *subsystems* of the administration system.

Gerhards takes a somewhat different approach in conceptualizing an intermediation system between public and governmental systems. He advances the more general thesis that subsystem-specific publics mediate between 'performance roles and public system roles' in all differentiated societal subsystems. In the case of the political system the subsystem in question is the *political public* (Gerhards 1993, 22). The political public is defined as an 'intermediate communication system' that mediates 'topics and problems of society as a whole ... to the political decision-making system...' (Gerhards 1993, 23). This definition has far-reaching implications. The subject matter mediated is societal topics and problems. If we relate this to the differentiation into performance system and public system, between which two the subsystemic public mediates, this subject matter must be assigned to the public system. The character of this intermediation is thus primarily the communicative transmission of these topics and problems from the public system to the performance system. This finds its expression in the term 'intermediary communication systems'. This conceptualization of an intermediation system can find no place in our model of the democratic process, since it requires unambiguous localization. The model is less concerned with the communicative transmission of information (topics and problems) than with the fulfilling of specific functions, first the *screening off* of the governmental system against the imperatives of permanently mobilizing support for current decision-making, and second the *transformation* of public demands to render the latter amenable to processing by the governmental system's decision-making activities. It is thus a question of specific actors producing quite specific action products (see Figures 2 and 3). These functions, similarly defined in various systems theories, cannot be performed by the political public as a communication systems that primarily communicates demands to the governmental system. In our model it is rather the political public that generates the problems necessitating an intermediation system.

Gerhards' later argumentation implies greater proximity to our model of the democratic process. He restricts the meaning of political public to the generation of public opinion and allocates it to a model of the policy process

(Gerhards 1993, 27-29). Thus localized, the political public is described as a 'opinion-formation system'²⁷ to be situated at the input end of the political decision-making process. This allows two conclusions to be drawn. The question we have raised, and which we consider decisive, of who and how this public opinion is mediated to the political decision-making system remains unanswered. Intermediation is thus once again reduced to the (influential) transmission of citizens' demands to the actors of the decision-making system. These demands take the form of public opinion. For Gerhards (1993, 26) public opinion is a substitute indicator for citizens' demands. We will be returning to this definition of public opinion in the metatheory of the democratic process. But even in the form of public opinion, one is still dealing with demands involving the problem of selection and transformation to make them amenable to processing by the decision-making system. In our model of the democratic process this is one of the functions of the intermediation system.

4.2.2 *The Collective Actors of the Three Subsystems*

4.2.2.1 The Collective Actors of the Governmental System

Differentiated social systems in complex societies gain their structure from the interaction patterns of collective actors, who in this capacity represent role linkages. The structure of these systems can thus be determined both via the linkage of individual roles and via the linkage of role complexes. The identification of the relevant collective actors of the system is a prerequisite for the definition of such structures. We will be attempting this for the three subsystems of the political system.

The relevant structural elements of systems are defined as collective actors to account for the metatheoretical postulate of introducing actor reference into systems theory. These collective actors can of course be understood as systems at a lower level of generalization. Rucht (1991, 7 et seq.), for example, refers to parties, associations and movements as systems of interest mediation, and the mass media as systems of information mediation. In our theoretical context,

²⁷ It would be more exact to call it a system for the formation of public opinion.

however, this terminology would mean a loss of necessary specificity. In drawing a distinction between systems determining action and systems capable of action, Schimank has stressed the necessity of differentiation within the category of the system. But even within the context of Schimank's argumentation, systems capable of action gain in precision if termed collective actors, since this establishes a point of reference that can make it clear what a system capable of action actually is.

At the first level of meaning, the concept of the collective actor implies an active collectivity. If action is defined as intentional action i.e., as action directed towards the attainment of goals, this presupposes that collectivities are also capable of such intentional action. The plausibility of this assumption increases in proportion to the explicitness and clarity with which the collectivity sets its goals and with which these goals consolidate in specific roles with internal authority to issue instructions and external authority to represent interests. This condition applies most stringently to formal organizations. The more a 'collective actor' deviates from these characteristics the more difficult it becomes to regard him as such and thus include him in the analysis. We will be coming back to this point especially in our discussion of the citizen as collective actor. At this point we must specify what we mean by collectivity. Our principle source for the concept is Parsons (1969, 21), for whom a collectivity is a structural unit of social systems, the primary function of which is the attainment of goals. Collectivities are *not* composed of individuals. They are a specific aggregate of roles. From this point of view, individuals are merely necessary substrata of role action. Roles are thus described by Parsons (1969, 21) as 'boundary structures' in so far as they establish a relationship to individuals, which, however, *as* individuals belong to the environment of the collectivity. With regard to roles, Parsons (1969, 31) introduces two further constituent specifications for collectivities. There must be roles permitting a clear distinction between members and non-members, and an internal role differentiation in terms of status. This latter aspect relates to the criterion we have already discussed that the more distinctly a collectivity's goals are

differentiated and consolidated in corresponding roles the better it can be identified.

There are marked differences in the degree of certitude with which collective actors can be assigned to the subsystems of the political system. The explanatory effort involved is correspondingly unequal. It is easiest with the collective actors in the *governmental system*. The governmental system constitutes the core of the political system, since, within the framework of the overall democratic process, it is specialized in the *actual* production and implementation of binding decisions²⁸. The fact that the governmental system can make decisions that are binding on the whole of society, and the fact that the basis for this decision-making activity is the monopolization and control of physical coercion, requires the detailed legal codification of the individual roles and role complexes in this subsystem of politics (Luhmann 1987, 149). As a consequence of this detailed legal codification by the constitution, the structure of the governmental system is highly formalized. This also means that it is clear which collective actors belong to this subsystem and what the function of these collective actors is. In describing the action products of the democratic process, a distinction has been drawn within the governmental system between decisions and implementations (see Figure 2). Decisions refer more precisely to the production of premises for decision-making and to the issuance of implemented decisions. Both are products of the *parliamentary* and *governmental* action²⁹. The premises for decision-making are specified by the *administration*, that is to say translated into detailed economic and legal rules of procedure³⁰.

28 The activities of actors in the governmental system are thus not only preliminary stages in decision formation.

29 For the sake of simplicity the model of the democratic process takes only parliament and government into account. In presidential systems the president must naturally be included as actor.

30 A further possible subdivision of the administration would be into government departmental bureaucracy and local administration (we have already addressed this aspect). In this division of functions it is the government departmental bureaucracy that is especially responsible for implementing decision-making premises, while local administrative authorities have the task of transmitting these implemented decisions to the societal

The outcomes of this specification are referred to as implementations, and after having been adopted by government and parliament, it is the implemented decisions that are finally transmitted to the societal environment as binding decisions.

4.2.2.2 The Collective Actors of the Intermediation System

The *intermediation system* as a subsystem of the political system mediates between the governmental system and the public system i.e., it mediates between two social systems. We have already explained that individuals belong to the environment of social systems and collectivities. In their role as citizens they belong to the political system, and the links between the individual citizen roles constitute the collectivity of citizens. This collectivity is one of the actors in the public system. For this reason, a sociological analysis of the exchange relations between two social systems cannot examine the intermediation between individuals and the governmental system. This is, for example, the analytical perspective taken by Rucht (1991), in which interest groups, mass media, and political parties all become intermediation systems³¹. We, on the other hand, consider that only the *political parties* can be regarded as collective actors in the intermediation system, assigning interest groups and the mass media to the public system³². This classification of political parties as the dominant actors in the intermediation system is also indicated by Luhmann when he refers to the intermediation system as 'party politics', and is clearly stated by Parsons. According to the latter (1969, 209), the exchange process between the public system and the governmental system is carried out by the

environment. Local administration decides in which concrete instances the implemented decisions should and may be applied.

31 This analytical perspective also relates to the well-known differentiation into micro, meso and macro levels.

32 Interest groups and the mass media naturally also 'mediate' the interests or demands of citizens to the actors of the polity. This is already contained in the concept of the articulation of interests and demands. But this very broad intermediation concept does not allow the conclusion that these actors belong to or constitute an intermediation system of their own that fulfils specific functions within the framework of the democratic process. This has already been justified in Chapter 4.2.1, and will be expanded in the context of this chapter.

party system. Analyses that are not primarily couched in systems theoretical terms argue similarly (Sartori 1976, ix, von Beyme 1984, 22, 374). It is thus possible to produce sufficient respectable references for the assumption that the political parties are *the* collective actors in the intermediation system. But this does not answer the question why this should be so. Since regarding intermediation systems and party systems as equivalent, and thus excluding interest groups from the intermediation system, is not uncontroversial, we will attempt to justify this definition with greater precision.

In the liberal democracies, the exercise of popular power by means of elections is coupled with a competitive party system. The institutional arrangement of the competitive party system constitutes this as the intermediation system. Before each election the parties have to offer the citizens both politicians to occupy the decision-making positions, and especially programmes (platforms) that are to be realized. Both these offers are made with the prospect of *possible* occupation of the decision-making positions. For this reason it makes no sense to assign the parties as such to the governmental system from the outset (only a subset of the competing parties can form the government, and only a subset of the competing politicians gets into parliament). It also makes no sense to assign them to the public system, since they articulate no demands, but on the contrary have to take articulated demands into account in order to be elected. This implies two things. First, a selection of demands (not all can be realized by governmental action) and second proposals on realizing demands. Precisely the selection and transformation of demands³³ make it possible for the governmental system to make effective decisions after the election. To this extent the parties mediate between the demands of the public system and the decisions of the governmental system.

The nature of the intermediation between these two subsystems by the political parties can also be elucidated from another perspective. If we accept the dominant rationality of political party action to acquire and retain power, this

33 In the model of the democratic process (see Figure 2) the demands selected and transformed by the parties are referred to as issues and programmes.

action rationality and the electoral mechanism define a double perspective of the political parties. First the *acquisition* of power at the current election and second the *retention* of power at the next election. This implies that the political parties must to a certain extent interlace the input and output perspectives of the polity from the outset. Precisely this double perspective provides mediations between the public and the governmental systems because it links up differing action rationalities, optimum responsiveness to the demands of the public system and the most effective realization possible of these demands. To what extent individual parties act rationally in this sense and actually link up the two perspectives is certain to depend on ancillary factors. One such factor is likely to be the extent to which political parties succeed in transforming themselves from parties with a clear cut ideological commitment into 'catchall' parties³⁴, thus gaining in relative flexibility with regard to citizens' demands. A further factor is likely to be the utility of the long-term perspective (next election) over the short-term perspective (current election). This calculation will doubtless be decisively influenced by the probability of winning the current election. If there is no danger of having to keep promises, a lot of promises can be made. Regardless of the situation in which individual parties find themselves, what distinguishes political parties from interest groups as collective actors in the political system is that they can potentially occupy political offices³⁵ (von Beyme 1984, 23). And for structural reasons this constitutional possibility places the political parties - and them alone - in a position to exercise the necessary mediation function between the governmental system and the public system. The intermediation system of a political system in representative democracies is thus largely identical with its party system.

34 Such parties are referred to by various names such as 'cross-class parties', or in Germany 'Volksparteien'. The various names indicate various aspects and have arisen in differing contexts. What is important for our purposes is that such parties loosen their close ties to very specific group interests and very specific programmatic goals, thus gaining in flexibility in their responsiveness to public demands.

35 Because interest groups do not have this possibility, they do not have to relate their demands to others nor possibly postpone or drop them. They do not have to select or transform demands as political parties have to do.

4.2.2.3 The Collective Actors of the Public System

4.2.2.3.1 The Citizens

The basis for legitimacy in representative democracies is essentially the fact that the power process originates with the citizen and returns to him via a feedback process. This gives rise to a circular power process with the citizens as the fixed point. The collectivity of *citizens* is accordingly the decisive collective actor in the public system. But to what extent and how are the citizens to be considered as a collectivity *capable of acting* or merely as an aggregation of individual citizens whose collective character consists only in the computed majority of votes cast? Before we can settle this question we must decide what we mean by 'collectivity of citizens'.

The collectivity of citizens has a highly formalized dimension in the sense that the constitutions of Western representative democracies lay down precisely who belongs to the collectivity and what rights and duties this membership imposes. Membership is thus clearly defined. This meets the first criterion for the existence of a collectivity. The whole complex of membership status and the rights and duties involved is frequently referred to as the institution of citizenship. The central components of this institution have been addressed from differing theoretical perspectives by Marshall (1965), Parsons (1969) and Heater (1990). The first component is the securing of fundamental civil rights, the second is the provision of political participation and the third is the guarantee of certain 'welfare state' performances, such as a provision of a minimum standard of living, universal education etc. These three components developed historically more or less in the above order. Whereas the basic rights component addresses the fundamental relation between citizens and the state with regard to the state monopoly on the exercise of power, and thus the fundamentals of the democratic process as a whole, the political participation component is to be assigned to the input end of the democratic process, and the welfare state component to the output end. However, the participation component is the major structuring and dynamic factor in the democratic process, primarily defined by the principle of free, equal and secret elections.

But *this* formalization of the voter role segments the collectivity of citizens into equal units to the exclusion of hierarchical differentiation, where the highest position could represent the intentions of the collectivity as a whole. Elucidation of the collective nature of this collectivity thus shifts to other levels.

One such level is that proposed by Parsons (1969, 19, 21, 40, 42), when he posits a legitimate norm system and a 'sufficient' degree of solidarity, cohesion or sense of community as defining characteristics of a collectivity. Collectivities thus also, or perhaps mainly, constitute themselves as 'imagined communities' (Easton 1965, 171-189; Anderson 1991; Fuchs, Gerhards and Roller 1993). The constitution can be understood as the legitimate normative order of the collectivity of citizens - naturally only in so far as it is also held to be legitimate by the citizens. The points of reference for generating and sustaining a sense of community can be extremely various. In western European nation states, differing combinations of territorial, religious, ethnic and other factors have served and continue to serve as the basis for a sense of community (Fuchs, Gerhards and Roller 1993). In Germany a debate has been running for some time on the question of the extent to which the constitution as the legitimate normative order is also apt to provide the basis for a sense of community. Sternberger (1990) has introduced the concept of 'constitutional patriotism', which has found widespread acceptance. Regardless of the plausibility of so cognitive a basis for a belief in community, it must be assumed that without a community that is believed in or felt to exist - on whatever basis - it is not possible to speak of a collectivity of citizens, or possible only in a very restricted sense of the term. The degree of collectiveness of this collectivity is not only theoretically determinable but especially an empirical matter. At all events, the extent of cohesion and solidarity within the collectivity of citizens is likely to be a factor with far-reaching political consequences. An example of such consequences is presented by the current difficulties political decision-makers in Germany are experiencing in their attempts to harness the solidarity of the collectivity in mobilizing understanding for the necessity of making sacrifices to aid the reconstruction of reunited Germany. This also illustrates Easton's (1965,

171-189) general thesis that the 'sense of community' is a fundamental resource of all political systems that principally takes effect in times of crisis.

A final question to be considered with regard to the collectivity of citizens has to do with its capacity to act *as* a collectivity as opposed to the capacity to act of its individual members (e.g, as voters). Such a capacity to act presupposes that collectivity interests can be identified in the first place, and that these interests can somehow be implemented by action, or be relevant for action in some broad sense of the term. In both respects the mass media and interest groups, as further collective actors in the public system, exercise a statable function for the collectivity of citizens. This hypothesis rests on two premises. 1 In highly modern societies there are no longer any limited and stable citizens' interests. Interests are complex and fluctuating. 2 The individual citizens, being as individuals the vehicle of whole complexes of roles, 'can become involved in the action context of the political system only in a selective, intermittent, and situation-related manner'³⁶ (Mayntz 1988, 32). Collective actors must be differentiated to compensate these two 'deficiencies' of the citizens and to give them collective form. The mass media and interest groups can fulfil this function each in their own way. A conceptual excursus is necessary in pursuing this thesis.

The point of reference of the excursus is the collectivity of citizens. Let us resume what we mean by the term. If we are to talk about a collectivity of citizens at all, a necessary minimum criterion is a rule of membership to establish clearly who belongs to the collectivity and who does not. This draws a formal external boundary. Internally a certain degree of solidarity and sense of community are necessary, although it is not possible theoretically to establish how far this must go. The degree of community of interests is a further level. These three levels build on one another and determine how marked the

36 This premise is at least plausible. With the help of the evident fact that individuals are bound up in complex role acting, it is possible to explain the phenomenon that the citizen, while having a marked willingness to participate in a wide variety of forms of political action, in fact does so relatively seldom (see Fuchs 1991b). Having a range of roles to play produces the problem of allocating time to the various options for action.

collective nature of the collectivity is. These levels all relate to the integration of the overall collectivity. At least in modern societies, however, a societal collectivity is layered 'downwards'. That is to say that below this level of integration there exist so-called 'solidary groupings' (Parsons) i.e., smaller collectivities forming part of the overall collectivity. Within the category of citizens we have thus drawn a distinction between the overall collectivity and subcollectivities. Both types of collectivity can only act within the framework of the democratic process if they address interests and demands to the polity. In Figure 4 the interests of the overall collectivity are called *collective interests* and the interests of the respective subcollectivities are called *particular interests*. *Individual interests* are introduced to complete this analytical differentiation, referring to the interests of the respective individual citizen.

Figure 4: A Typology of Interests and Goods

	collective goods	particular goods	individual goods
collective interests	A		
particular interests	B	C	
individual interests	D	E	F

Interests have already been defined as action goals of individual and collective actors, who seek to attain these goals within the framework of situational and structural constraints (see Chapter 4.1). How can this definition be operationalized with regard to the empirical identification of interests? If it can be assumed that there is always a variety of goals for the individual citizens that they want to attain by their political action the question is which of these

goals is to be given priority³⁷. Only current (priority) goals among the mass of possible goals are referred to as interests. These can be assumed to be decisive for the actual action of individuals. Empirically to determine citizens' interests it is accordingly necessary to establish the hierarchy of goal preferences. *Individual interests* are thus the goals of individual that rank relatively high in the hierarchy of his preferences for possible goals.³⁸ This fundamental consideration also holds true for definition of particular interests and collective interests. But since by definition collectivities are composed of a multiplicity of members, an additional criterion is necessary for the relationship between the preference hierarchies of the individual members. The only plausible criterion we can see is the majority rule. *Particular interests*, that is to say the interests of a subcollectivity of citizens are thus interests that are ranked relatively highly by the majority of members of this subcollectivity. The same definition is to be applied to *collective interests*, with the difference that reference is then to the overall collectivity of citizens.

In Figure 4 a distinction is made between interests and goods. The three categories of good are based on the classical analysis by Musgrave (1959), who took the possibility of exclusion of enjoyment of a good as the decisive criterion for differentiation. Collective goods are thus characterized by the fact that no-one may be excluded from enjoying them even if he has not contributed to their production. In the case of individual goods, by contrast, utility of the good is directly coupled to consideration, that is to say it has a price. In applying Musgrave's definition to our analysis, *collective goods* are those goods that every member of the overall collectivity of citizens may enjoy. *Particular goods* are those goods that only a subcollectivity of citizens may use, and *individual goods* are goods that may be used only by a subset of citizens without this subset constituting a subcollectivity.

37 In action situations it is completely unrealistic to seek to attain a large number of goals let alone all goals.

38 It cannot be established theoretically how high in the preference hierarchy an action goal must rank to qualify as an interest. This question can be solved only empirically and pragmatically.

In Figure 4 the differentiated types of interest and the differentiated types of good are related to one another. Three logically possible links are not made (see hatched part of the matrix). It is not plausible that the overall collectivity of citizens articulates the interests that relate to the production of particular and individual goods, that is to say to goods that a section of its members are excluded from using. For the same reason it is not plausible that a subcollectivity formulates the production of individual goods as one of its interests. On the premise of rational action in conformity with the self-interest theorem, we would have to assume that the interests of the overall collectivity relate to collective goods, the interests of subcollectivities to particular goods, and the interests of individuals to individual goods. If this assumption is basically correct, it becomes important to ask under what conditions individuals take an interest in the production of particular and collective goods (we will be looking at certain aspects of this later). After this conceptual excursus we can now explicate with greater precision the function of the mass media and interest groups for the citizens within the framework of the democratic process.

4.2.2.3.2 The Mass Media

The mass media are not to be understood as collective actors in the same sense as, for example, interest groups and political parties. This is because they are also, or even primarily, a medium of intermediation between all collective actors of the political system³⁹. For this reason we must discover how the mass media can be assigned the status of a collective actor with a statable function in the democratic process. In particular this requires evidence to be furnished of a

³⁹ We stress again that the intermediary nature of the mass media does not invite the conclusion that they have the function of an intermediation system between the public system and the governmental system. Media mediation of topics, opinions etc. is not the only form of intermediation, and it mediates not only between the actors of the public system and the government, but also between actors within the public system and between those within the governmental system. These aspects apply regardless of the thesis already addressed that the intermediation system of politics has quite specific functions for the democratic process that the mass media in particular are incapable of performing (see Chapters 4.2.1 and 4.2.2.2).

specific action product that is produced by this collective actor and that is relevant to the democratic process. So-called *public opinion* can be posited as this action product. The nature of the mass media as medium determines that opinions are published there. But what distinguishes published opinion from public opinion? The decisive characteristic of public opinion is the successful suggestion to the public by the mass media that published opinion expresses a majority opinion of the citizens, and that this opinion also has a relatively high priority rating for them. This is the significance of public opinion, as Gerhards (1993, 11, 26 et seq.) has also stressed. Public opinion is *constructed by* the mass media *in* the mass media. This thesis does not exclude actors seeking to influence this construction process outside the mass media⁴⁰. It can be assumed that the discrepancy or homogeneity of external attempts to exercise influence weaken or strengthen the rationality and selectivity within the mass media system⁴¹. The decisive circumstance is, however, that in the final instance it is the mass media themselves that in obedience to their own rationality and selectivity logic can generate public opinion more or less via published opinion, thus establishing the suggestion that they represent the collective interests of the citizens. This suggestion has a double effect with far-reaching consequences for the democratic process. First, the citizens can, precisely as an outcome of this suggestion, adopt as their own what is suggested to them as a majority opinion, thus actually forming a majority with the corresponding consequences for electoral behaviour. Exactly how such mechanisms function has still to be investigated. Noelle-Neumann's (1989) explication of what she calls 'opinion climate' and 'silence spiral' is one of the few attempts to describe the mechanisms theoretically and empirically. The second relevant effect has to do with the actors of the polity. The more successfully the mass media convey

40 This issue is discussed by mass communication research under the heading of 'agenda-building'.

41 Gerhards and Neidhardt (1990) and Gerhards (1992) describe in detail the rationalities and selectivities of the mass media specific to the system. One of the most important elements in mass media action logic in producing public opinion is the drive to justify a point of view by reference to generally accepted values. This implies, for example, that an actor who pursues particular interests when participating in public discourse has to present this interest as a collective one.

the suggestion of a majority opinion, the more rational it becomes for these actors to accept this as a substitute for the contingent interests and demands of the citizens (see also Gerhards 1993, 26 et seq. and Luhmann 1988, 175). But this substitution takes place only because there is conjecture about an actual or potential majority among citizens. The actors of the polity naturally cannot with any assume degree of certainty that public opinion on a topic really represents a current collective interest of the citizens, even if they believe it likely. This is probably one of the reasons why the actors of the polity attempt to obtain indications on the contingent interests of the citizens that could be relevant in deciding how to vote both by watching the mass media and by conducting surveys. Surveys alone are insufficient because they provide only snapshots of the permanent generation process of citizens' interests, interests which can rapidly change and the change of which can be influenced by the mass media. Watching the mass media alone is not enough for two reasons. On this basis it cannot with certainty be decided whether public opinion really represents the collective interests of the citizens, and it is unclear whether these collective interests have relatively higher priority in influencing how the citizens vote than, for example, the particular interests of subcollectivities of which the citizens are also members.

Let us illustrate the putative importance and effect of public opinion with a particular topic that also brings up the contingency problem again. Voters have to decide how to vote under conditions of great uncertainty. They cannot know how the political parties will act once they are elected. Downs (1957) sees a lack of the information necessary for a rational decision on how to vote as being characteristic of this situation. Nor can the lack be remedied by comparing the platforms of the competing parties, since voters know that such platforms are at least to some extent formulated from a tactical point of view, and that none of the parties will be in a position to keep all electoral promises. One rational possibility to counteract this lack of information is to be guided by what was actually done in the previous legislative period. In such a procedure the governing parties enjoy a structural advantage, since it only makes sense to vote for an opposition party if the governing parties have a distinctly negative

record. Fiorina has described this sort of voter rationality as 'retrospective voting' (see also Popkin 1991; Fuchs and Kühnel 1993). In so far as such retrospective voting occurs, the opinion of the individual voter on the subject of 'government performance' is decisive for his decision on who to give his vote to. There is, however, a further problem concerning the formation of voter opinion on this subject. Most voters find it difficult to decide on the basis of their primary experience of how governmental action has affected their interests. From this point of view it seems likely that voters will be guided by public opinion on 'government performance', opinion produced in and by the mass media. The real subject matter of the mass media is not the assessment of government performance in particular policy fields, but a *generalized* evaluation. Precisely the construction of a public opinion on government performance as a whole makes this suitable as an 'information shortcut' for a 'reasoned voter' under conditions of 'low-information rationality' (Popkin 1991, 7 et seq.).

The mass media operate in conformity with their own action rationality. Against this background we may ask why and how government performance can become an issue in the construction of a public opinion in and by the mass media. Luhmann (1981a, 317) has introduced *actuality* as the most important criterion for agenda-setting by the mass media, defining the novelty of the topic as the most important measure of actuality. Only an actual (i.e., current, 'topical') topic is able to attract the attention of large numbers of members of the public and to set the dynamics of public opinion formation in motion. If government performance relates to the entire legislative period, this means that the topic must become a long-term one if a public opinion on it is to develop. The constraint of actuality permits few topics a long life. Luhmann (1981a, 317) cites inflation as an example for a suitable long-term topic, since the rate of price increases changes constantly and every change is politically relevant. Constantly recurring government actions can similarly be taken as a new event to be interpreted each time they happen in the light of a rising or falling evaluation of government performance. The fact of deterioration or improvement in the assessment of government performance is in its turn of

such vital importance for the public of the mass media that this topic has a good chance of being selected.

Placing government performance on the long-term agenda of the mass media constructs a history of the legislative period. Public opinion of government performance during the period of the election campaign is more decisive for the voting behaviour of the citizens than it is during earlier stretches of the legislative period. But this public opinion has constituted itself within the framework of the history of the entire legislative period i.e., it is not without reference to what has occurred earlier. Even if government performance is permanently on the agenda, it cannot entirely escape the logic of 'topic careers' (Luhmann 1990, 177). There is little novelty value in it if the mass media detect uniformity of government performance. The action rationality of the mass media demands a diagnosis of rise or fall. One of the well-established turning points for the *mise-en-scène* of such trends is the 100-day threshold. From the perspective of mass media action rationality it is an interesting and important question how long such trends can be extended in time without losing their novelty value. It is probably not possible to construct a continuous trend (whether a rise or a fall) covering the whole of a legislative period without its novelty value diminishing and the attention of the public being withdrawn after a certain time. If this assumption is tenable, then from the point of view of the competing political parties it must be rational to contribute to the construction of a trend in public opinion on government performance (agenda-building) that begins about half-way through the legislative period. For the governing parties, this naturally also means constructing an upward trend and for the opposition parties a downward trend.

After having explicated the concept of public opinion, we will now return to consideration of the collectivity of citizens. We assumed that the citizens' collectivity cannot of itself establish a community of interests. The mass media were assigned the specific function of compensating for this deficiency. Citizens' collective interests are short-term and changing constructions, essentially generated by the mass media and which become manifest in the mass media. These constructions were themselves labelled public opinion.

Within the framework of the model of the democratic process, public opinion is thus a specific category of demand addressed by the public system to the polity.

The extent to which the mass media actually fulfil this function of articulating and generating collective interests, and the extent to which this is taken for granted by actors and affected parties is in the last instance an empirical question. On the basis of a case study, Gerhards (1993) shows that at least the individual printed media can be assigned to political conflict structures, possibly even stabilizing the latter. If it is possible unambiguously to assign individual media to such conflict structures, it makes it difficult to posit the construction of collective interests by these media, precisely because the collectivity of citizens is divided by such conflict structures. As far as Gerhards' findings are concerned, it is a moot point whether they were topic-induced, or whether they apply with regard to the printed media rather than to television⁴². We will conclude the discussion of the salience of the mass media in the public system with the following conditional formulation. If, under the above premises there is such a thing as a collective interest of citizens, it can develop only as described with the collaboration of the mass media, and can only become manifest in the mass media. The extent to which this function of the mass media is not exercised is proportional to the probability of collective interests not existing and to the complementary probability of the collectivity of citizens being fragmented.

The peculiarity of the mass media in comparison to other collective actors has been described as their 'double nature' of actor and medium. In the context of this chapter they have been examined in their capacity as actor. They are an actor in so far as they generate a specific action product within the more general category of demands. This has been referred to as public opinion, which by its nature is a short-term and inconstant construction of the collective interests of the citizens. From this analytical perspective the implications of the mass media as medium for the democratic process have necessarily been neglected. The

⁴² A structural component of the mass media that could be relevant with respect to fulfilment of the assigned function is whether television broadcasting is organized on a public or private basis.

spread and utilization of the mass media (Kiefer 1987) has turned the process of communication between the actors of the political system into one that is essentially determined by the mass media. The specific rationalities of the mass media system cannot thus remain without consequence for this communication process. If it is true that selection of events by the mass media is controlled by certain news value factors⁴³ (see Luhmann 1971, Schulz 1976, Staab 1990, Gerhards 1991), this selectivity is likely to encourage augmented polarization of the competing political parties in the intermediation system. Such polarization need not necessarily involve a corresponding divergence in substance, but can relate to a rhetorical exacerbation of marginal differences, nevertheless producing a diffuse impression of conflict and hampering consensual processes. However, these aspects have less to do with the specific nature of the mass media as collective actors, the particular concern of this chapter, than with the fundamental question of the type of communication process in highly modern societies that can, among other things, be characterized by the spread and utilization of the mass media.

4.2.2.3.3 Interest Groups

In addition to the mass media, we have named interest groups as specialized collective actors playing a primary part in constituting the collectivity of citizens as a collectivity capable of action. This capacity to act relates to the articulation of demands vis à vis the actors of the polity. This function of the mass media and interest groups does not exclude individual citizens from articulating demands. This can, for example, take place at public events involving politicians, or by individually contacting politicians. However, this sort of demand articulation is probably of little significance for the responsiveness of actors of the polity, since it is not sufficiently instructive of the distribution of demands in the collectivity of citizens, which alone determines electoral success. It is another matter with citizens' opinions ascertained by means of representative surveys. Such opinions are not

⁴³ In addition to the novelty value already mentioned, these include crisis symptoms, scandals, surprises, controversies etc.

necessarily identical with far-reaching demands. But if it is possible to establish by such measurement techniques that the recorded opinions can also be interpreted as demands, then for the actors of the polity such surveys are to a certain extent functionally equivalent to the mass media and interest groups in ascertaining the demands of the citizens, which they have to take into account if they wish to be elected. Substituting surveys for observation of the mass media and the interest groups for the purpose of establishing public system demands would be rational for the actors of the polity only if the citizens were to produce their demands on their own. We assume, however, that the demands of the citizens are varied and fluctuating, and that the mass media and the interest groups are the principal generators of this fluctuating variety. At the same time, only the media and the interest groups are likely to be in a position to concentrate and focus this fluctuating variety at given moments (such as during the electoral campaign), so that the citizens are given pointers for their political action (in particular for their voting behaviour). Thus, in the function they exercise within the public system, the mass media and the interest groups do not seek expressly and effectively to articulate existing demands of the citizens, but also contribute to constructing these demands, thus in a certain fashion also to constructing the collectivity of citizens.

The collectivity of citizens is integrated on two levels. First on that of the overall collectivity, and second on that of subcollectivities. In relation to the citizens, the function of the mass media is to articulate and generate collective interests, and is thus to be assigned to the first level of integration. The corresponding function of interest groups is the articulation and generation of particular interests, and is thus to be assigned to the second level of integration. The literature defines *interest groups* both in broad and in narrow terms (on the concept and analysis of interest groups see Salisbury 1975; von Beyme 1980; von Alemann 1987). For the metatheory of the democratic process, the definition of Salisbury (1975, 175) seems to be an appropriate point of departure. 'An interest group is an organized association which engage in activity relative to governmental decisions'. For our purposes this definition must be modified and supplemented in two ways. First the interests represented by interest groups

relate to interests of subcollectivities of the citizens, and second, representation of these interests addresses not the actors of the governmental system, but the actors of the intermediation system.

The general concept of interest group covers two different types, *interest associations* and *social movements*. Both can be described as interest groups in so far as they are specialized collective actors with the aim of generating and articulating the interests of sub-collectivities of the collectivity of citizens. The relationship of the two types of interest groups to the citizens is, however, established in quite different ways. Interest associations are permanent formal organizations with relatively clearly defined corporate purposes. A corresponding permanent interaction process occurs between the interest associations and the social groups they represent. In this way stable relations arise within the public system, which give this system a certain structure. On the basis of such stable relations between social groups and interest associations, theories have been elaborated claiming the existence of still more comprehensive stable relations in the democratic process. The theory of political conflict lines (Lipset & Rokkan 1967) assumes that stable relations exist between social groups, interest associations and political parties, and the corporatism thesis (Schmitter 1979, 1983) adds administrative units to the list. Both theories thus postulate the existence of certain informal structures of the democratic process that to a greater or lesser degree span the subsystems. However, it is not clear how far this type of democratic process structure can still be assumed to apply to 'post-modern' societies (see also Crook, Pakulski and Waters 1992). The differentiation of social structure and the dissolution of homogeneous social milieux more or less destroys the basis for such informal structures.

Given the nature of social movements, this type of interest group must have a quite different relationship with subcollectivities of citizens. The social movements form as overt movements only on specific occasions, to relapse into a latent state thereafter i.e., they reduce themselves to organizational cores and

everyday networks⁴⁴. What distinguishes social movements from interest associations within the framework of the public system is thus primarily their flexibility with respect to interests of the citizens that cannot be dealt with, or can be dealt with only inadequately, by institutionalized interest (the interest associations)⁴⁵. An example is the interests of the ecological movement, which relate to goods which no-one can be excluded from enjoying once they have been produced. The situation is somewhat more complicated in the case of the interests of the feminist movement, which must initially be regarded as particular interests directed to particular goods (in so far as men are to be excluded from enjoyment of these goods). The interests of the feminist movement are collective goods only if one can argue that they relate to not yet acquired collective goods that should long since have been realized as a collective good (equality between man and woman). Notwithstanding this particular problem, it can be assumed that the interests of social movements in the seventies and eighties were largely concerned with the production of collective goods. This does not necessarily mean that collective interests were involved. This was only the case where a majority of the collectivity of citizens gave relatively high priority (relative to particular goods) to the production of such goods. On the basis of rational choice theory, Olson (1965) had concluded that the development of formal organization to represent collective goods was a difficult process, even where collective interests were involved. The main reason for this difficulty was the possibility we have already mentioned of enjoying the good produced even if one has not contributed to its production. From this point of view social movements can be regarded as functionally equivalent to formal organizations for the representation of a certain category of public system demand⁴⁶. Social movements are able to perform this function because participating in their collective activities implies a different cost-benefit

44 At this point we will do no more than record the question whether this latent state can still be regarded as a social movement or merely as the necessary substratum of such movements that becomes a movement only following successful mobilization of this substratum.

45 The constituent characteristics of social movements are described in extenso in Offe (1985); Rucht (1988), Neidhardt and Rucht (1992), Fuchs and Klingemann (1993).

46 Differences in the ways interest associations and social movements function concretely within the scope of the democratic process have been dealt with by Rucht (1993).

equation than is the case with formal organizations. For one thing the effort of participating in such collective action is relatively slight. And for another such participation may involve selective incentives, such as expressive experiences, that go beyond the propagated goal (collective good). On the basis of such a cost-benefit calculation, participation in the protest activities of social movements can be made plausible also to those citizens for whom the collective good that is the goal of the protest activities has lower priority than particular goods (such as economic group interests).

Over the past two decades the social movements have in fact presented themselves as movements representing certain interests that we have referred to as collective goods. As a rule, this type of interest has been regarded as determinative for the new social movements, which for this reason among others have been classified as 'new'. A further characteristic of the new social movements was (and is) the limited participation of a considerable number of citizens in protest actions to articulate these interests. These protest actions are made possible by the infrastructure of modern societies, such as the mass media-related possibility of rapid and far-reaching dissemination of information and the possibility of rapidly overcoming geographical distance with the aid of transport systems. This structure of possibilities provided by modern society is in principle also available for the articulation of quite different interests. In this sense social movements can be regarded as a specifically modern form of interest group formation and interest articulation. From the point of view of the individual, two fundamental problems can be solved in this manner, which in their turn are the consequence of modernization processes. First the problem of the scarcity of time (which results from, among other things, the oversupply of options for action available to individuals in their leisure time), and second the problem of desire to participate. In protest actions the individual can assume a certain political role for a limited period, thus solving both problems. From the perspective of the actors of the polity, however, an increase in this form of citizens' organization would further increase contingency in the public system. This is all the more true because such interest groups can also form at the

output end of the democratic process, for example to block certain implemented decisions.

On the basis of its individual members, the collectivity of citizens is in a position neither to identify the interests of the collectivity (as interests of the overall collectivity or as interests of sub-collectivities), nor to transform these into collective action. Within the framework of our metatheory, interest groups and the mass media have been regarded as differentiated from the collectivity of citizens that assume this function, and thus contribute to the formation of the collectivity of citizens. The mass media and the interest groups have hitherto - so as not to complicate the analysis at this stage - been described as collective actors. In fact, however, they are configurations of individual collective actors of the same type, and these configurations in their turn form a subsystem 'mass media' and a subsystem 'interest groups'. The structure of these subsystems of the subsystem 'public' is also characteristic of the structure of the public system itself. Our metatheory will not undertake to explicate this assertion. However, another structural aspect of the public system is of direct significance in the context of our argument, which relates a possible increase in contingency in the public system (mentioned in connection with social movements) to the interest associations as well.

Within the framework of the ongoing modernization of modern societies, the political parties in most Western democracies have more or less transformed themselves into broadly based so-called 'catchall parties', thus permitting the differentiation of the party system that can perform the mediation function between the public system and the governmental system. In effect, this transformation of the political parties means a considerable degree of delinking from certain social groups. While this delinking makes it possible to react flexibly to public demands, change on the part of the public is the precondition for this transformation of the parties. The public system as the collectivity of citizens has undergone differentiation, so that the traditional simple cleavage structure on the basis of which the party system was originally constituted has lost its contours. Authors such as Beck (1986) take this differentiation thesis so far that they posit a dissolution of the social forms and social milieux of modern

industrial society, and the consequent liberation of the individual. According to Beck (1986, 122 et seq.), the outcome is an individualization and diversification of life situations. This would also mean that a delinking of interest associations and citizens occurs within the public system. The interest associations would then relate less to definable and stable social groups and more to permanent organizations for the representation of interests (in the case of interest associations), which have constantly to seek their own clientele (see also Streeck 1987). The constituent relationship would then be reversed. It would not be existing, permanent social groups that constitute interest associations but existing, permanent interest associations that constitute a changing clientele of varying dimensions, the group nature of which consists solely in the limited and specific community of interest. We do not intend to establish how far this individualization process has actually advanced. But the trend seems to indicate that it involves both *the differentiation* and *destructuring* of the public system. Such a simultaneous process of differentiation and destructuring of the public system would necessarily make the action of collective actors of the polity more difficult. This would then have to take place under conditions of a high degree of public system contingency both at the output end and at the input end of the democratic process. However, this conclusion holds true only if these processes of differentiation and destructuring have in fact taken place and have reached an advanced stage. In this regard far more theoretical attempts have been made to demonstrate the plausibility of this thesis than empirical proof has been furnished⁴⁷.

47 On the question of the structuredness of the public system and the relationship between the public system and the party system, a number of empirical analyses within the scope of the concept of political cleavage structures have been produced (e.g., Fuchs 1991a; Wessels 1991, 1993; Gerhards 1993).

4.3 Generalized Action Orientations

4.3.1 *Generalized Action Orientations in the Political System as a Whole*

In discussing the action theory paradigm, the most important criticism of this paradigm was summarized under the heading 'lack of system reference' (see Chapter 3). The lack of system reference was seen primarily in the failure to take *generalized action orientations* into consideration. Generalized action orientations are, in addition to role structures, one of the levels of meaning of which social systems become differentiated from their societal environment. From an action theory perspective, these generalized action orientations form the common and stable meaning of the action performed by actors within the system. The actor's options for action, among which they must exercise their choice (their specific action orientation), are available only within the framework of such generalized action orientations. Although they are implicitly addressed in action theory with the concept of 'constraints', in action analyses they are in effect tacitly taken for granted. According to Schimank (1988a, 623) full explanation of actions must thus 'always take place in two phases. In the sense of the rational pursuit of interests, actors *select* actions within the framework of these *conditioning* generalized action orientations'. Schimank consequently asks how these generalized action orientations are to be determined and answers by positing categories with the aid of which this can be done⁴⁸. The most important theoretical work on the issue of generalized action orientations has been presented under the heading of symbolically generalized exchange media or communication media by Parsons (1969, 352-472), and further developed by Luhmann (1975a, 1975b). These are the principal theoretical approaches we shall be addressing.

The social system that interests us is the political system. The first question to be settled in this regard is that of a generalized action orientation valid for the political system as a whole i.e., for all actors wishing to act politically. We have attempted to determine the general meaning of political action with regard to

48 Schimank (1988b) implements these proposals with regard to sport as a societal subsystem.

the function of the political system, namely in the production of collectively binding decisions (see Chapter 4). The precondition for performance of this function is the generation of sufficient power. The basis of the generation of (political) power is the monopoly on the exercise thereof, and the consequent possibility of enforcing the binding effect of the decisions made by the use of coercion should the need arise. In the theories of Parsons and Luhmann we have mentioned, power is also described as the generalized action orientation of the political system in the sense of the generating, acquiring, and exercising power. In his later analyses, however, Luhmann (1986, 167-182) goes still further, taking even the institutionalized organization of the power process into account to a certain extent. In differentiated political systems, the collectively binding decisions are made in specialized posts endowed with the corresponding competence to do so, which the political parties compete with one another to occupy. The generalized action orientation in the political system is thus directed towards occupying such decision-making positions. For this reason Luhmann (1986, 170) regards the code of government and opposition as the uniform code of politics as a whole. He chooses the term code to indicate that only two values are involved, interdependent and excluding a third option. Only if one adopts the code of government and opposition as generalized action orientation⁴⁹ does one act in the political system i.e., does one generate resonance and not mere noise.

One of the criteria for a generalized action orientation that corresponds to a developed political system, and which makes the latter possible in the first place, is its openness to variety, variability and contradiction on more concrete levels of meaning. This is realized by the code being delinked from programmes (Luhmann 1986, 171). This delinking means that occupation of decision-making positions can no longer be tied to the attainment of quite specific goals. Filling government posts via elections serves to reconcile the general code with a specific programme for the duration of the legislative

49 In the sense of metatheoretical presupposition, it is assumed that all actors are aware of this code. Awareness does not necessarily mean having a fully conscious grasp of the code. It can also be diffuse background awareness that is nevertheless action oriented.

period. Filling government positions alone does not yet constitute decision-making action. One must also know how to exercise political power, and this is formulated in the form of platforms. The essential point is that the linkage of code and programme is limited in time, is subject to constant scrutiny during the legislative period, and is put out to tender at the next election. Within the framework of the democratic process there is continual communication on the appropriateness of this fundamentally limited and rescindable linkage between occupation of government positions and a given platform. Such communication presupposes comparative points of view and evaluation criteria. Luhmann (1986, 174) assumes that for this purpose complex political systems develop so-called 'secondary coding' of the government / opposition code, which controls the critical communication of government action in relation to opposition alternatives. If these codes shall have the status of durable and generalized action orientations, the current government and opposition programmes cannot be compared only on the basis of the programmes themselves. Luhmann varies his examples of such secondary coding that provides durable and generalized points of view from which to evaluate changing programmes. Originally he proposed the code of progressive and conservative (Luhmann 1981b), but in later analyses he prefers the codes restrictive/expansive (in relation to state activities) and ecological/economic. This vacillation seems to indicate that the hypothesis of such secondary coding is more difficult to sustain in the face of empirical reality than is the case with primary coding. Luhmann's examples show in positing such codes he has been overtaken by actual developments. A generalized action orientation fulfilling the function of secondary coding advanced by Luhmann must apparently be still more general than the examples he has proposed. At least in the liberal democracies of western Europe, a possible alternative is the left/right code or left/right schema⁵⁰.

This postulate was investigated in two analyses (Fuchs and Klingemann 1990; Fuchs and Kühnel 1990). *Empirical* evidence was furnished that the left/right schema meets the *theoretical* criteria Luhmann sets for a political code. The

50 The functional equivalent in the USA of the European left/right code is generally claimed to be the code of liberal/conservative (Fuchs and Klingemann 1990).

left/right schema as such is a spatial archetype that will accept a variety of content. Within its scope of meaning it is thus capable of reacting to almost every sort of societal change. The schema's current scope of meaning is structurally characterized by a *restricted* repertoire of *generalized* elements *binary* in nature⁵¹. Due to these properties of the left/right meaning scope, actors using the schema in communicating can mean different things, but the differences are still so interrelated that communication can succeed despite the divergence. If the left/right schema is projected on to the government/opposition code, an asymmetrical perspective is established. The government is either left-wing with a right-wing opposition, or the government is right-wing with a left-wing opposition. And a first control on assessment of government and opposition action is provided by whether an actors regards himself as being to the left or to the right. In this sense the left/right schema constitutes a generalized action orientation that prestructures actors' choices.

Although the vast majority of citizens are familiar with the left/right schema, and despite the common use of the schema in political communication, this generalized action orientation has been less of a constituent element in the political system of liberal democracies than has the government/opposition code. It is not a necessary condition for generating resonance in the political system and ensuring continued communication. The left/right schema is accordingly not used by all actors in the political system, nor is it used in all situations by those that do so. The left/right schema can thus be regarded as *one* generalized action orientation of the political system, but not as *the* generalized action orientation that defines a common and stable meaning for action accepted by all actors of the political system.

51 At this point we cannot go into any more detail about what this means. See the two cited analyses. It is these structural properties of the left/right schema's complex of meaning that make it suitable for a political code.

4.3.2 *Generalized Action Orientations in the Three Subsystems*

The generalized action orientation of actors in the political system as a whole has been defined as orientation towards occupying decision-making positions. Since in liberal democracies this takes place within the institutional framework of competition between parties, a more precise definition has been advanced in the form of the government/opposition code. This code exists as background knowledge of political system actors on what action within this system is basically about. This definition of the generalized action orientation of the political system brings us back to the argument that the differentiation of social systems proceeds by means of a mutual process of influencing and restricting structural differentiation (at the role level) and the differentiation of a generalized action meaning (see Chapter 4.1). Even if generalized action orientation is by its nature at a more general level of meaning than are role structures, relative structural dominance can be posited for the constitutive process of both levels of meaning. There are two reasons for this. The distinctness of role acting facilitates the identification of more general levels of meaning (cognitive dimension), and role acting is rendered relatively strongly binding by legal formalization (normative dimension). In defining the generalized action orientations of the three political system subsystems, we take this relative structural dominance as our starting point.

The democratic process has been construed as a directed sequence of action products. These action products are principally generated in exchange processes between the polity and the public system. The dominant structural elements that make these exchange processes meaningful in the first place are the *right* of the collective actors of the governmental system to make binding decisions for the purpose of realizing collective goals, and the *right* of the collective actors of the public system to formulate these collective goals. Both are transmitted by the franchise i.e., by the citizens selecting political parties at periodic elections to occupy decision-making positions. A political party is able to implement its platform only if it is elected, and the citizens can expect their demands to be met only if the parties they favour occupy the decision-making positions. From this point of view it is plausible to regard government/

opposition as a code that represents the generalized action orientation of the actors in the political system. For the purpose of describing the exchange processes that take place between the polity and the public system, this code is, however, still too general. In accordance with the model of the democratic process (Figure 2), this exchange process has an input dimension and an output dimension. At the input end it takes place in the interaction between the political parties and the actors in the public system. Public system actors seek the greatest possible *responsiveness* on the part of the political parties towards their demands, and in exchange offer support in the form of votes. Vice versa, the political parties want the greatest possible *support* from citizens and in exchange provide the corresponding responsiveness towards the demands of the citizens (for example by taking these demands into account in electoral and party platforms). The concept of support is to be preferred to that of vote maximization because maximizing the vote is not necessarily a rational strategy for all parties. In the interest of occupying decision-making positions it can also be rational to seek the support of quite specific segments of the electorate so as to ensure inclusion in the government coalition⁵² (the Free Democratic Party in Germany provides an example of a party pursuing this type of rational strategy).

At the output end, the exchange process between the polity and the public system takes place in the interaction between the actors of the governmental system and those of the public system. This is, however, somewhat more complicated than at the input end. The governmental system actors primarily seek acceptance of implemented decisions by the actors of the public system. We have already mentioned that this acceptance is a variable factor and can no longer be conceived of as acceptance without motive. The governmental system can offer more or less *effective* realizations of the demands articulated at the input end. But the problem is that *effectiveness* can only become apparent in the outcomes, whereas approval of the implemented decisions *precedes* the

52 Another reason why we prefer the concept of support is because it is broader. Support (or the opposite) is expressed not only through exercise of the franchise but also in other forms of political participation.

possibility of achieving such outcomes. The actors of the governmental system must therefore first convince the actors of the public system that the implemented decisions *could* be effective. On this basis the actors of the public system can then decide whether the implemented decisions are to be regarded as *appropriate* in relation to the demands they have articulated. Approval of implemented decisions depends largely on this interpretation, which influences the outcomes of the governmental system's decision making and thus its actual effectiveness.

We have thus established the generalized action orientations of the three political system subsystems, distinguishing two generalized action orientations for the public system. These are responsiveness (public system at the input end), support (intermediation system), effectiveness (governmental system), and appropriateness (public system at the output end). Each represents the action meaning shared by the collective actors in the individual subsystems within which these actors make their choices for concrete action. These postulated generalized action orientations possess a certain degree of theoretical and intuitive plausibility, but require confirmation by empirical analysis. If they are indeed significant in controlling action, even if in generalized form, then empirical verification will in principle be possible. Regardless of the results of such empirical measurement, a connection can be postulated on the basis of the meta-theoretical reflections we have advanced so far. The more clearly a generalized action orientation of a (sub-)system can be identified, and the more clearly it can be distinguished from the generalized action orientations of other (sub-)systems, the more markedly will this system have become established a discrete and relatively autonomous system.

4.4 Variations on the Process Model

The model of the democratic process we have been discussing construes this process primarily as a formal one. We define formal as laid down by the constitution or, in Luhmann's words, 'supported by the official power structure'. A further, less explicit point of reference of the model construct is

provided by assumptions that are not covered by formal structure. The formal structure of representative democracies does not as such lay down that citizens' demands are to reach the government solely via the mediation of the political parties, nor does it determine what we have called motiveless acceptance. In liberal theories of democracy such definitions are introduced *additionally* as prescriptive postulates (on liberal theories of democracy see Barber 1984, Held 1987, Hirst 1990). We believe that Luhmann's theory of the political system also returns to the prescriptive postulates of liberal democratic theory. However, he links them with the assumption that these postulates are a prerequisite for exercising functions of the political system in complex societies. We need not discuss this problem further at this point. What should be noted at this stage is that two deviations from the prescriptively interpreted description of the process have already been introduced into the model we have so far presented. The introduction of these deviations occurs on the basis of empirically observable facts. We are referring to the *conditional* acceptance of the implemented decisions by the public system at the output boundary of the democratic process, and to the articulation of demands by the public system that *by-passes* the political parties as the differentiated intermediary actors. This articulation has two variations. Lobbying by the interest associations and protest action by the social movements. Although the two variations are not necessarily compatible with the idea of representation, they are not excluded by the formal structure of representative democracies. For this reason, at least the second variation can be interpreted as a radicalization of the democratic principle, which is both legal and legitimate in representative democracies. What consequences this radicalization has for the quality of the democratic process is another matter.

A further variation on the formal democratic process has already been mentioned in passing, although not dealt with systematically, when we discussed the collective actors of the public system. It was assumed that the interest groups and the mass media not only articulate but also generate the interests and demands of citizens. Let us examine and generalize this aspect. The exchange processes between the collective actors occur under conditions of

double contingency i.e., neither of the parties to the interaction knows what can be expected of the other. For the political parties, for example, there are no reliable indications of what the voter really wants and for the voter there are no longer any reliable indications of what the parties really want to do or could do if they were in power. But since what any actor does depends on anticipating what his partner in the interaction does, this produces a highly contingent constellation. Nor do the generalized action orientations we have described eliminate this, since they constrain concrete options for action only within a very broad context. According to Luhmann (1970, 165; 1987, 148), this constellation gives rise to an unofficial counterprocess of communication, which can be understood as dealing with the contingency problem.

One possibility of conceptualizing the official and unofficial communication processes is, as we have mentioned above, to draw a distinction between a power process and influence process. Each process in its own way regulates the transmission of selections made by one actor for another. The logic of the power process has already been described. The formal structure (in this case the constitution) determines who is to take over what selections from whom. Deviations from this determination are subject to legal sanctions. The motive for acceptance of selections is thus primarily to avoid the imposition of sanctions. The transmission of selections in the counterprocess must necessarily operate with different motives for acceptance.

Transmission of selections on the basis of influence cannot rely on legal sanctions (with the potential use of coercion), but only on *persuasion*. Parsons (1969, 415) correspondingly defines influence as 'a means of persuasion' (see also Luhmann 1975, 74 et seq.). The willingness of actors in the democratic process to be persuaded to assume the selections of an actor downstream from them in the formal process depends on the opportunity this affords for reducing contingency. The administrative authorities allow themselves to be influenced by the interest associations because this improves the chances of the implemented decisions being accepted. The government allows itself to be influenced by the administrative authorities, because this increases the probability of the decisions made being put into effect. The (government)

parties allow themselves to be influenced by the government because this increases the chances that the public will be offered viable programmes. This contrary chain of influence seems perfectly plausible from the perspective of rationally acting actors of the polity. But what motivates citizens to accept the selections made by the political parties, if the citizens are themselves both the point of departure and the destination of the democratic process, and thus have only themselves as reference point for their action⁵³? One of the problems that generate contingency for the citizens is that - with some exaggeration - they do not know what they ought concretely to want. The latitude for the demands that citizens as members of a modern society may address to the polity is highly overdetermined. The greater the extent to which traditional social structures decay and the individualization of life situations progresses, the more pronounced this overdetermination becomes. This also eliminates the boundaries between possible interests and demands that are unambiguously attributable to specific social groups. The motivation for citizens to accept the attempts to influence the formulation of their demands undertaken by political parties (and by interest groups and the mass media) lies in the reduction of this contingency. In this sense attempts to exercise influence may be not only accepted but possibly even desired. The citizens' expectation that political parties will offer clear programmes and alternatives can be seen as an expression of this desire. The chances of collective actors to influence the citizens depend on qualities perceived in and attributed to these actors, such as reputation, reliability, integrity etc.

The variations on the formal or official democratic process we have described involved first skipping single stages in the process, and second to unofficial, that is to say counter-process. A third variation resulted from the necessity for taking systematic note of expert knowledge to increase the efficiency of one's own action for the purposes of optimizing the means to attain certain goals. The type of expert knowledge that is relevant depends on the subsystem within

53 Choosing an option for action and neglecting another does not have the same consequences for the citizens and for the actors of the polity, whose actions always entail the risk of losing the decision-making positions or of not gaining them in the first place.

which the respective actor is acting and on the generalized action orientation that is characteristic of this subsystem. If the generalized action orientation of the political parties is to maximize support, the political parties will necessarily develop a need for instrumental knowledge on generating support. This could be one of the main reasons why practically all the larger political parties in the liberal democracies follow the results of polls or even establish within their formal structures the corresponding sections for producing such knowledge. Other types of expert knowledge are needed for the most effective possible implementation of the governing parties' programmatic goals. This relates to the possibilities for action and the consequences of action in the areas of society affected by the respective goal. This expert knowledge reaches the governmental system primarily through the permanent communication between government department bureaucracies and the relevant experts. Experts outside the political system thus constitute a factor in influencing all the action products of the democratic process. The mechanism that ensures this influence is founded not in a formal structural element of the political system but in the attempt to act as efficiently as possible, the point of reference for efficiency naturally differing from actor to actor in the political system. If we were to attempt to integrate this influence of experts into the graphic model of the democratic process (see Figure 2), we would have to direct a horizontal arrow towards the vertically aligned action products coming from the areas of the societal environment of the political system in which the relevant expert knowledge is produced.

5. A Concept of Political Structures

5.1 The Structure Concept of David Easton

The model of the democratic process describes this process as a directed sequence of specific action products of specific actors. At the empirical level the individual action products and the relations between them are variable factors. An example: what demands are formulated, how they are formulated, and how they influence decisions (made by governmental system actors) depend on the choices made by the relevant actors in action situations. But the actors' choices are subject to constraints that limit the latitude for choice. A complete explanation of concrete actions (and thus of action products) and of action concatenation must therefore include both the constraints and the actors' rational calculation. We have already mentioned the structure of social systems as constituting the most important of these constraints, and given some indication of what is meant by the term. We will now deal more systematically with the *concept of political structures*. We will be discussing what is to be understood in general by political structures, and will not analysing concrete structures. For this reason we will not take more recent empirical studies as our point of departure, which deal with the structural characteristics of democracies with the aim of classifying individual democracies on an empirical basis or of explaining the divergence in performance of these democracies (see inter alios Powell 1982, 1987; Lijphart 1984, 1989; Weil 1989; Lane and Ersson 1991). The emphasis of these studies is, however, more on empirical analysis than on discussion of a concept of structure on the basis of which empirical structural characteristics could be determined. Easton's statement (1990, 3, 19 et seq.) that the concept of structure is one that has been neglected in political science is in tune with this assessment. Easton himself develops a concept of political structures in a detailed theoretical analysis, which provides us with our starting point.

The most general meaning of structure, already indicated in the colloquial use of the term, is a certain ordering of elements that has a degree of stability in the

time dimension. The most important characteristic of such an order is that not all possible relations between the elements are permitted, but only a limited number. It is precisely this limitation that produces structure. If we are dealing with political structures, the first question is what the specific elements are that constitute them. For the differentiated political systems with which the metatheory is concerned, this question has already been answered. According to Luhmann (1970, 155) it is different types of role linkages that constitute the different political structures. Roles are accordingly the smallest structural elements in political systems. This assumption is shared by Almond and Powell (1978, 12, 52) and to a certain extent by Easton (1990, 74a). Parsons (1971) sees the role in general as the basic category for all social systems. Roles can be defined as relatively consistent aggregations of generalized expectations relating to a social position and linked to the demand that the individuals who occupy the position abide by these expectations (Wiswede 1973, 18, 38). This definition of role contains both a normative component and a behavioural component, and it is frequently unclear whether the structure concept refers to only one of the two components or to both at the same time. In this respect Easton makes two clear decisions. He distinguishes between cultural structures and behavioural structures and allocates social structures as interactional structures exclusively to the behavioural level (Easton 1990, 51, 67, 74 et seq., 260). He sees the relation between the cultural level and the behavioural level as a causal one i.e., the role norms are independent variables that help to explain role action (Easton 1990, 74). These theoretical decisions are plausible, but we do not intend to follow them entirely. Before we can justify this, we have still to deal with a further fundamental distinction made by Easton, that between *formal* and *informal* structures.

The difference between the two forms of structure is in the degree of explicitness with which they are introduced and made transparent for participants and affected parties. In modern societies this explicitness of formal structures is achieved above all by means of binding written rules (Easton 1990, 66, et seq.). Legal norms have the highest degree of formalization, since on the one hand they lay down the behavioural expectations and on the other the sanctions to be

imposed in the event of these expectations being contravened. The expectations themselves are endowed with greater stability by the concomitant expectation of sanctions in the event of contravention (Luhmann 1984, 436). This stabilizing effect would have to increase in proportion to the threat of sanctions. This is one of the reasons why Giddens (1984, 22) introduces the criterion strong sanctioning/weak sanctioning as a defining characteristic of social structures. Thus the degree to which sanctions are to be expected and the severity of sanctions to be imposed when rules are broken can, together with the degree of explicitness, be regarded as criteria for distinguishing formal from informal structures. The distinction between formal and informal structures can also apply to structural arrangements in premodern societies. Easton (1990, 66, 81) considers the ritual or ceremonial introduction of behavioural expectations to be functionally equivalent to the written legal norms of modern societies. There are thus formal structures to be discovered in all societies and not only in modern societies. In contrast to formal structures, informal ones are less explicit, involve less well-defined consequences in the event of rules being contravened, and are usually (but not always) subject to weaker sanctioning. Formulated in positive terms, Easton (1990, 81, 96) refers to informal structures as conventions and customs or as established rules of behaviour. The distinction between formal and informal structures has so far been described with reference to rules and norms⁵⁴, and thus, according to Easton (1990, 67), on a cultural level. But Easton also applies this difference to interaction structures i.e., to the behavioural level, by which he means the actual behaviour of actors. By crossing Easton's two analytical distinctions of formal/informal and cultural level/behavioural level, we obtain four categories of political structure⁵⁵.

54 The concept of rule is somewhat broader in meaning than that of norm, which is more closely associated with the criterion of sanctioning (on the rule concept see Crozier and Friedberg 1980, 52; Giddens 1984, 17 et seq.; Easton 1990, 64, 67 et seq.).

55 The structure categories distinguished in this typology all refer to lower-order structures. These are distinguished from higher-order structures by, among other things, the criterion of observability (Easton 1990, 241, 244 et seq., 260, 266).

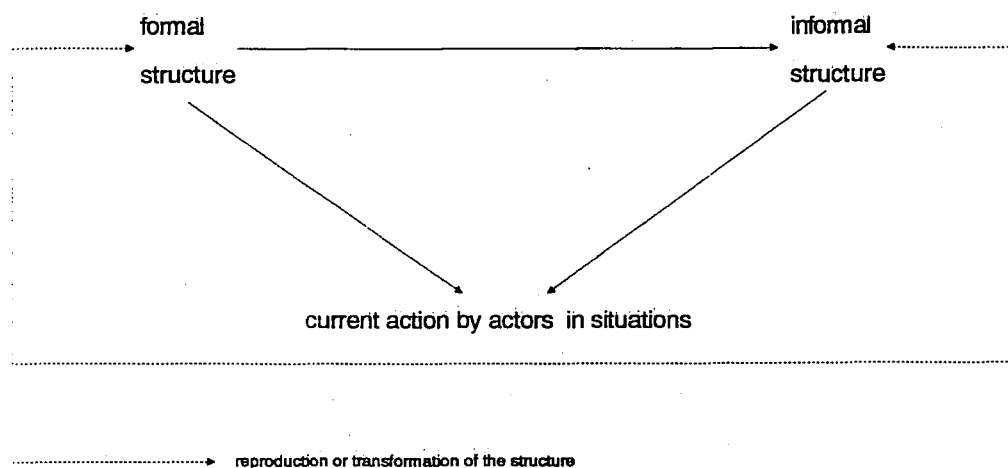
Figure 5: Categories of Structure (Easton)

		Origin of structure	
		Formal	Informal
Type of structure	Cultural	formal rule structure	Informal rule structure
	Behavioral	Formal empirical structure	Informal empirical structure

We note that Easton (1990, 55, 60) sees social structures and thus political structures as stable interaction patterns between actors. Central to Easton's structure concept is, moreover, that these interaction patterns refer exclusively to actual behaviour. Expectations and norms of behaviour are accordingly assigned to the cultural level, and in the case of formal structures are referred to as *formal rule structures* (Easton 1990, 95). Formal political structures are thus defined as *formal empirical structures*. Easton elaborates his concept of formal rule structures with great precision. The meaning of formal empirical structures, by contrast, is less clear. What, for example, is the nature of the formal on the behavioural level? Easton's (1990, 68 et seq., 103 et seq.) solution to this problem is to establish formal structures at the behavioural level, where behavioural structure *corresponds* to structure on the cultural level. But this means that the formal cannot be defined at the observational level alone but only by subsequent comparison of the empirically ascertained interaction pattern with the formal rule structures. Easton's solution thus implies that the formal empirical structure cannot be defined in isolation from the formal rule structure. We feel that the difficulty of drawing a clear distinction between the two types of formal structure invites the fundamental question whether political structures can be localized at the behavioural level. Is it conceptually possible to distinguish with sufficient clarity solely at the behavioural level between the actual actions performed by actors and the constraints (structures) for these actions? If structures are seen as being constraints on action, then the *preliminary selection* of actions permitted under these constraints cannot occur at

the level of the acts themselves, but only at that of expectations of action (Luhmann 1976, 121; 1984, 73, 140). And in Easton's terminology, this means at the level of rule structures. Empirical structures thus arise and can thus be observed *because* there are rule structures. In relation to Easton's categories of structure shown in Figure 5, we therefore understand political structures primarily as rule structures and secondarily as empirical structures. This applies with respect to both formal structures and informal structures. The empirical level is defined as the acting of actors in situations, and the extent to which rule structures determine this action is an empirical issue. In so far as they do so, patterns can be observed in the actual interactions between actors, and these patterns (empirical structures) in their turn permit conclusions to be drawn with regard to the latent rule structures.

Figure 6: A Model of Action Structure and Current Action



In Chapter 3 we dealt with the circumstance that structural constraints never fully determine the actor's action, but do so only to a greater or lesser degree, and that there are always margins of liberty for the actor. The actors' taking advantage of these margins of liberty is structurally relevant only to a certain extent. Not all aspects of action relate to norms and rules i.e., they are not even taken into account by the latter. They are thus structurally neutral. Other aspects of concrete action, by contrast, clearly relate to norms and rules, and are consequently linked to the demand that these norms and rules be respected when acting. When this actually happens, one can speak of *reproduction* of the

structure (see Figure 6). The observable forms in which this reproduction is manifested are Easton's interaction patterns or empirical structures. The structure is transformed in proportion to the contravention of prescriptive expectations. This *transformation* can mean either that a given structure is dismantled, or that it is restructured. A causal relationship is assumed to exist between formal and informal structures. Informal structures form around formal structures, which constitute the core of the structure and restrict the development of informal structures.

5.2 Structures as Generalized and Complementary Behavioural Expectations

If we adopt Easton's terminology, political structures in our metatheory will be described as formal and informal rule structures. Rules refer not to actual behaviour but to behavioural expectations. The latter concept ought more precisely to be termed *generalized and complementary behavioural expectations*. This provides us with a broader concept covering both the forms of constraint on action we have been discussing, generalized action orientations and role structures⁵⁶. The generalization of behavioural expectations limits potential action space (Luhmann 1984, 397). Generalized behavioural expectations preselect the actions admissible in the system, what can typically be expected of parties to an interaction. *Complementarity* means that these behavioural expectations interrelate. Complementarity has two aspects. In the case of generalized action orientations it refers to identical behavioural expectations⁵⁷ (each party to an interaction expects the other to have the same action orientations), and in the case of roles it can refer to different expectations (which are nevertheless complementary). Role acting does not as a rule take place in isolation, but in a

56 The terms role structures, rule structures and action structures are largely synonymous.

57 On the basis of the generalized action orientations discussed in the metatheory, this would, for example, mean that all actors in the political system can count on all others acting in conformity with the government/opposition code, and that all actors in the intermediation system have the support of the public as their generalized action orientation, and expect that the same applies to the others.

complex of differing but interrelated roles. With respect to generalization, Luhmann (1970, 121; 1984, 140) distinguishes three dimensions, material, time and social generalization. *Material generalization* refers to the complementary expectations of parties to an interaction on how to act. *Time generalization* refers to the permanence and reliability of the complementary behavioural expectations. This permanence and reliability is generated above all by standardisation, the setting of norms (contra-factually stabilized behavioural expectations). In modern societies norms are usually set primarily by law and by the sanctions law imposes if expectations are not abided by. *Social generalization* refers to the assumption that actual and potential interaction partners agree on complementary behavioural expectations. According to Luhmann (1970, 122) every social system needs a certain degree of congruent generalization in all three dimensions. In other words, durable complementary behavioural expectations with a high level of presumed consensus are required⁵⁸. They form the core of social structure. In modern political systems this core is determined by the role structures laid down by law. To a large extent we accept Luhmann's definition of social structures, but reject social generalization as a defining element. If the presumption of consensus or actual consensus is already taken as a defining characteristic of social structures, then we believe it impossible to show how reproduction or transformation of these structures can occur. This reproduction or transformation is essentially determined by the degree of consensus or support that the actors concerned give these structures.

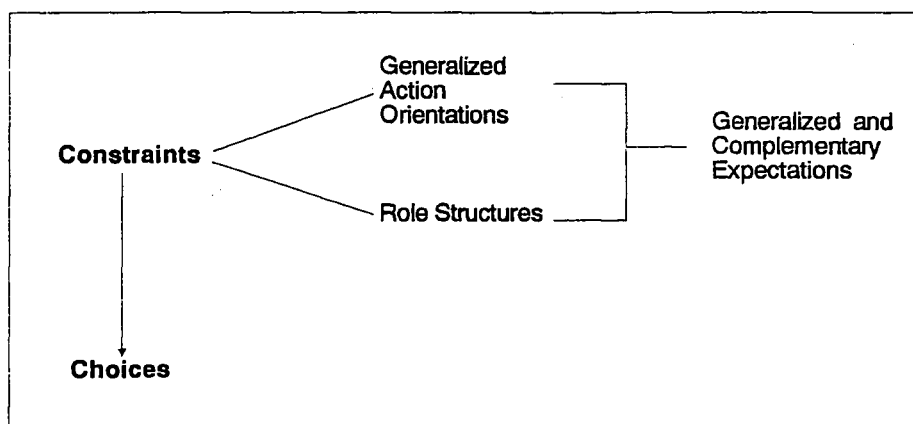
We thus understand the *formal structure* of the political system of liberal democracies to be the generalized and complementary behavioural expectations of the relevant actors as defined by law⁵⁹. The complementarity of behavioural expectations operates on two levels. On the level of the distinct

58 Institutions can be understood as examples of such congruent generalizations. Göhler (1987, 1990) also argues in this direction. But since the concept of institution has associations going far beyond this (see Easton 1990, 58 et seq.), it has no clearly definable analytical status in our systems theory context.

59 This definition covers both the material determination of behavioural expectations and determination of the consequences of contravening expectations.

roles, the linkage of which forms the structure of collective actors, and on the level of collective actors, the linkage of which forms the structure of the political system. *Informal structure* consists of patterns of generalized and complementary behavioural expectations that develop on the basis of habit (for example on the basis of conventions and customs). These formal and informal structures are the most important and direct constraints on the actors' action in the political system. To a large extent they determine what goal attainment options are open to actors in the first place. To a certain degree they thus determine their choices in action situations. In addition to structures, we have discussed the *generalized action orientations* of actors as constraints on their action. Such action orientations were defined as stable, shared orientations of actors in a system, which thus also constitute generalized and complementary behavioural expectations.

Figure 7: Generalized Action Orientations and Action Constraints



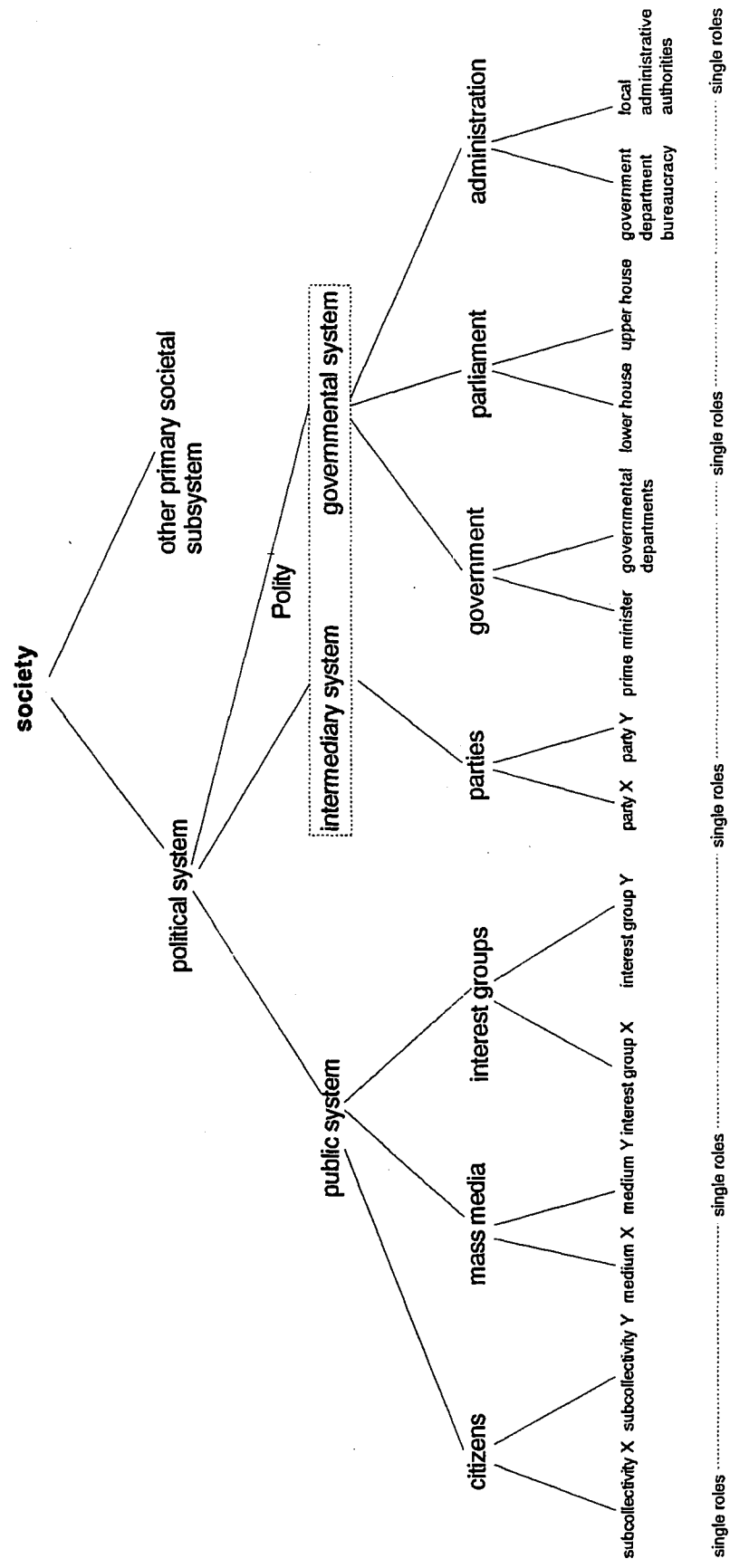
Whereas role structures imply the complementarity of differing behavioural expectations⁶⁰, generalized action orientations refer to the complementarity of identical behavioural expectations of all actors (see the example in Footnote 57). They are thus generalized behavioural expectations at different levels of generalization. The metatheory of the democratic process is intended to provide the theoretical groundwork for explaining the actual action of political system actors. From this point of reference a continuum can be posited between specific and generalized action orientations and behavioural expectations that

⁶⁰ Between different roles and different collective actors.

can be divided into at least three theoretically relevant sections. The lowest level is that of the distinct actors (individual or collective) who wish to attain their respective goals by acting in concrete situations. The next level is that of role structures, which typically prescribe how actors are to act and generate expectations on how others will act. This limits actors' specific action orientations and allows them to relate to one another. The topmost level is formed by the generalized action orientations of all actors in the system. Social systems are formed by both levels of generalized and complementary expectations, by role structures and by generalized action orientations.

As far as the structures of the political system are concerned, various structural levels can be distinguished, which following Easton (1990, 270) can be described as a hierarchy of political structures (see Figure 8). The structure concept we propose can apply to all social systems and to the diverse hierarchical levels of their structural differentiation. The political system is a social system constituting one of the primary societal subsystems. The highest level in the hierarchy is society, the most comprehensive social system, differentiated into diverse primary subsystems, the one that interests us being the political system. In our metatheory of the democratic process, the political system differentiates into three subsystems, the public system, the intermediation system and the governmental system. From certain analytical points of view, the intermediation system and the governmental system can be taken together under the heading *polity*. Each of the three subsystems of the political system differentiates into specific collective actors, and these in their turn into distinct roles. Roles form the lowest level in the hierarchy of political structures, and can therefore be described as the base elements of these structures. Starting from this lowest level, each successive level represents increasingly complex configurations of role networks. The increasing complexity is, however, not a mere aggregation of more and more roles. The structural units of each successive level are quite specific linkages of structural units from the respective preceding level. Among other things, this postulate implies that the structure of a political system does not have to be determined concretely by displaying the entire complexity of role linkages in the political

Figure 8: A Hierarchy of Political Structures



system, but merely by defining the specific configuration of the three subsystems of the political system. The same logic would have to be applied in determining the structures of lower hierarchical levels. The governmental system, for example, could be defined as a specific configuration of government, parliament and administration. In the context of his theory of political structures, Easton (1990, 270 et seq.) speaks of much the same thing as a 'nesting hierarchy' of structures⁶¹.

Within the hierarchy of political structures, we must return to an important analytical differentiation we have already addressed in drawing a distinction between social systems determining action and social systems capable of acting⁶². Social systems capable of action are those that are capable of intentional action at least in a broader sense of the term. In the hierarchy of political structures this applies only to levels relating to distinct roles and to collective actors, and, for example, not to the level of the subsystems of the political system. Only the governmental system could under certain conditions be understood as a collective actor. If there is a clear enough majority in parliament to provide the government with considerable autonomy of action, the government constitutes something like the vertex of the entire subsystem (governmental system), the final instance to which the binding decisions of the system can be attributed as intentional action products. Regardless of what in particular can be considered a collective actor and thus a social system capable of acting, it is by definition clear that manifest interaction patterns and latent behavioural expectations can be observed and measured only in this category of social system. This does not make it any easier to define the structures of social systems determining action or of higher-order structures. Higher-order structures then have to be analytically reconstructed from the lower-order structures. At all events it seems to us necessary to determine in concrete terms what can be understood as structural characteristics at these levels *before*

61 However, the aspect that is emphasized in this 'nesting hierarchy' is that the higher structural units determine the operational modes of the lower structural units.

62 The same matter is addressed by Easton (1990, 241-279) in his distinction between higher-order structures and lower-order structures.

applying data reduction procedures to a set of structure indicators and allocating the resultant dimensions to higher system levels. It is only then that a meaningful selection of indicators can be made, and only then that the results of such data reduction can meaningfully be interpreted in theoretical terms. But the theoretical determination of concrete structures and of the ensuing empirical analysis is not the object of the metatheory under discussion.

Having explicated the structure concept, we must now differentiate the structure concept we had been using prior to the explication. The structure of a social system has been hitherto taken to mean the networking of the collective actors belonging to the given system. Two different aspects must henceforth be taken into account in this networking. First, networking defined at the level of behavioural expectations (rules, norms), and second networking occurring at the level of actual behaviour. It is the first type of networking in particular that is to be regarded as *structure* under the definition of structure explicated above. The second type of networking is to be regarded rather as an interaction *pattern* generated by this structure. The concrete action products of the democratic process are then naturally to be understood as the direct consequence of actual actions and interactions of collective actors. These interactions are characterized by, among other things, a more or less strongly developed and stable pattern.

6. Political Structures and Political Performance

The concept of political structures we have presented can prove fertile for empirical analysis only if concrete structures of the liberal democracies - the subject matter of the metatheory of the democratic process - are defined. This structure concept can provide the theoretical basis for this endeavour. Once the structures of individual liberal democracies have been concretely i.e., empirically established, they can serve as explanatory variables in considering the empirical phenomena of the democratic process. They include in particular the concrete expression of individual action products of the democratic process, and the question how strongly one action product determines another. The latter, for example, involves the question of the extent to which the demands articulated by the public system are taken into account in the action products of the actors of the polity (programmes, decisions etc.). Within the context of our metatheory we cannot deal with the concrete implementation of this explanatory strategy. We will merely address two general problems that arise in connection with such attempts at explanation, and which are frequently neglected in research.

One of these problems is the meaningful specification of structure variables as explanatory variables. Which level in the hierarchy of political structures is relevant for which dependent variable? For example, is the responsiveness of political parties to the demands of the public system determined exclusively by the structure of the party system, or is it necessary to have recourse to a higher structural level covering intermediation system and governmental system (polity)? Or can the articulation of certain demands by interest groups be explained only by the structure of the subsystem of interest groups rather than by the structure of the public system as a whole? The second general problem is the meaningful specification of dependent variables that are to be explained by political structures. For the action products *within* the political system this is not particularly problematic. It is different with the *outcomes* that are *intended* to be achieved in its environment through the decision-making activities of the political system. Where Lijphart (1991), for example, explains diverse *economic* performances (economic growth, inflation rates, unemployment quotas) by

means of varying structural arrangements in representative democracies⁶³, and in this regard recommends 'constitutional choices for new democracies', he is probably overestimating the possible effects of political action. In the same way as Sartori and Easton have criticized sociological reductionism in explaining political phenomena, it can be claimed that political science reductionism has been applied in explaining economic phenomena. In exact analogy to the political system, the economic system is a differentiated societal subsystem with its own structures and its own rationalities. And for this reason it can be assumed that the economic phenomena analysed by Lijphart can primarily be explained by means of endogenous economic system variables. This does not preclude political variables from having a certain explanatory value *as well*, but this can be empirically ascertained in a meaningful way only if explanation takes both economic and political variables into account (as far as the dependent variables mentioned above are concerned). If this is not the case, there is a risk of the explanatory model being incorrectly specified, producing distorted estimations of the effects of the variables taken into account in the explanatory model.

Let us return to one of the central points of reference of the metatheory of the democratic process dealt with in our introductory chapter. With reference to Fukuyama's theses, we assume that the elimination of the fundamental alternative to the liberal democracies has brought the comparison between variants of liberal democracy to the fore. The criterion for comparison is political performance. To cite Almond and Powell (1978, 392): 'for professional political scientists the comparative study of political performance ought to be a central one'. The final issue in the metatheory of the democratic process is consequently the conceptual clarification of political performance.

The political systems of the OECD countries have been described as performance systems (see Chapter 4.2.1), and one of the characteristic features of performance systems is the differentiation into roles of production of performance

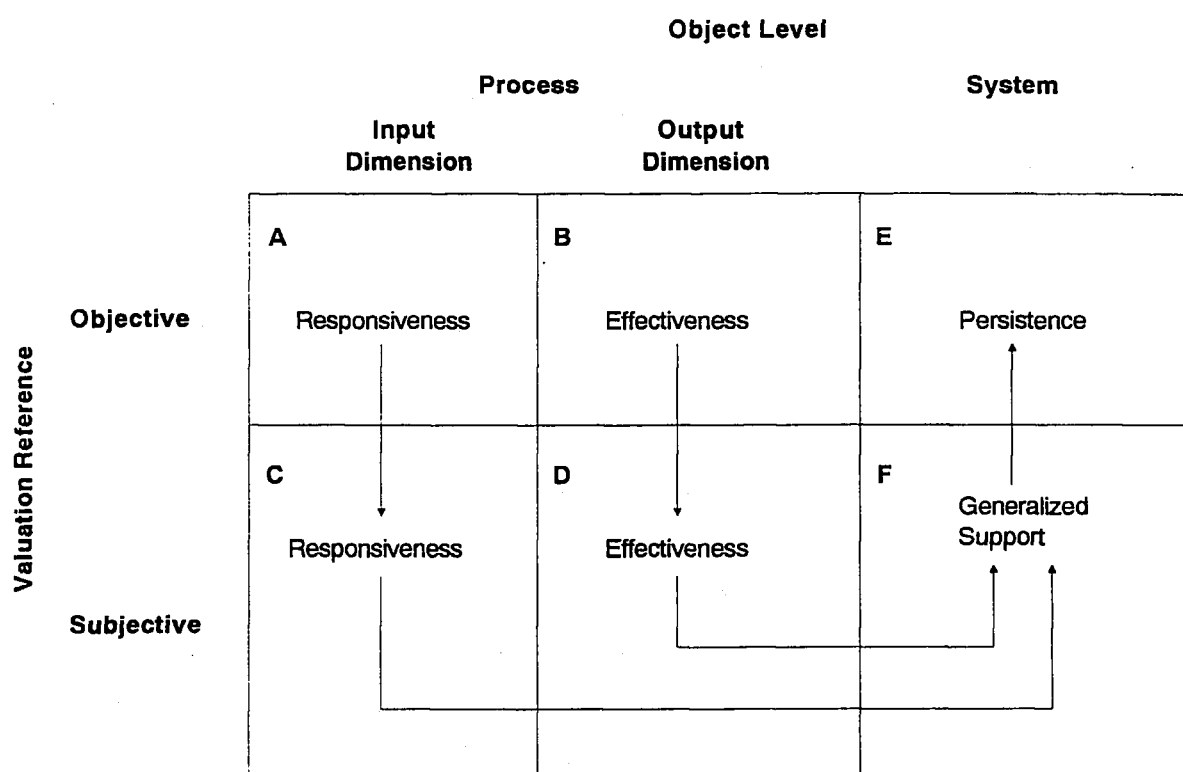
63 Lijphart posits four fundamental types of democracy that he uses in his explanation. Presidential democracies with majority systems or with proportional representation, and parliamentary democracies with majority systems or with proportional representation.

and roles of acceptance. On the basis of this differentiation of roles and the related generalized action orientations, a distinction has been drawn between a production *system* and an acceptor *system*, referred to in the metatheory as public and polity. From the analytical point of view of the production of performances, the intermediation system and the governmental system have thus been subsumed under the concept of polity and contrasted to the public⁶⁴. As we have defined this opposition, political performance can refer only to the action products of the polity, that is to say to the performances of the actors of the polity. These performances are, however, produced for the public, and the public (in its aspect as the collectivity of citizens) is, at least in normative democratic theory, the point of departure and the destination of performance production by the polity. These circumstances are determined in detail by the formal structures of the political systems of the liberal democracies, which also involve legal codification. Political performance thus refers to performance by the polity *for* the public, and the evaluation of this performance is thus undertaken from the point of view of the public. On the basis of the model of the democratic process (see Figure 2), the political performance of the polity can divide into two dimensions. The first dimension relates to the *responsiveness* of actors of the polity to the demands of the public at the input end of the democratic process, and the second dimension relates to the *effectiveness* of polity actors in implementing these demands at the output end of the democratic process. These two evaluation aspects must remain analytically separate, and must not be fused from the outset into one 'responsive effectiveness' or 'effective responsiveness'. In democratic theory there are differences of opinion on whether it is the responsiveness or the effectiveness of the polity that corresponds to the basic democratic norm. A distinction can be drawn between 'input-oriented' and 'output-oriented' democratic theories

64 The concept of polity is broader than Easton's concept of regime (1965, 190-211). Easton sees the regime structure as determined by 'the structure of the authority roles', the latter being characterized by the competence to make binding decisions. For Easton, the structure of the regime is therefore largely identical with the structure of the governmental system in our metatheory. Since the political parties *as* parties are invested with no such decision-making competence (only as incumbents of authority roles), they also cannot be assigned to either the governmental system or the regime.

(Scharpf 1975, 21, 28). But it must also be empirically established which of these two performance aspects is the more important for the citizen in which situations.

Figure 9: Categories of Political Performance



The responsiveness and effectiveness of polity actors can be described and evaluated from two points of view. What are the *objective*⁶⁵ facts, and how are they *subjectively* perceived by the citizens? It is certain that so-called objective responsiveness and effectiveness influence the citizens' subjective perception. But according to the metatheory of the democratic process, they are also influenced by definatory communication processes between interest groups, the mass media, and the competing political parties. A further influential factor is

⁶⁵ The 'objective' responsiveness of the polity can, for example, be measured by comparison of the demands of citizens empirically determined by surveys with the empirically determined taking into account of these demands in party platforms. Economic and social indicators could serve to establish 'objective' effectiveness.

the selective perception of political information by the citizens themselves, controlled by their cognitive and evaluative schemata. For these reasons, the 'objective' and 'subjective' levels must also be analytically separated, and it must be an empirical task to establish both the extent to which the objective responsiveness and effectiveness of the polity determines the subjective perception of the citizens and the explanatory value possessed by the other factors mentioned. The subjective perception of the responsiveness and effectiveness of the polity by the citizens is endowed with political relevance within the context of the democratic process in two regards. First through its consequences for the electoral behaviour of the citizens or for other forms of political participation, and second through its consequences for the generation of generalized support. The extent of generalized support for a political system is generally considered the most important determinant of the persistence of the system (see *inter alios*, Easton 1965, Grew 1978, Linz 1978, Lichbach 1981, Zimmermann 1981, Fuchs 1989). The stability or persistence of political systems is one of the fundamental issues in political science. The concept of persistence was introduced by Easton (1965, 211, 220 et seq.), who prefers the term to that of stability because it avoids the association with the static concept of permanence. On the contrary, according to Easton, the perpetuation of a political system is determined by its adaptability to societal change. In relation to the structure of political systems, this means that political systems persist if they preserve their fundamental and constituent structural characteristics while reacting to changing environmental conditions by altering relatively peripheral structural elements. The process-level performance categories of responsiveness and effectiveness can thus be complemented by the system-level performance categories of generalized support and system persistence (see Figure 9).

In our opinion there are two reasons for regarding the generation of generalized support of the polity by the citizens as a special category of political performance. First because of the salience of this variable for the persistence of the political system, and second because of its relevance for questions of normative democratic theory. Generalized support refers to an attitude towards the democratic process as a whole and to the structures that control this

process. The extent of generalized support is therefore a criterion for the realization of the democratic basic norm ('popular sovereignty') by means of actually democratic processes that is more informative than polity responsiveness and effectiveness with regard to individual demands of citizens⁶⁶. At the level of everyday political processes, specific dissatisfaction is self-evident and necessary for the dynamics of these processes. Both with regard to the analytical aspect of political system persistence and to the normative aspect of realizing popular sovereignty, the decisive question is whether and to what extent such specific dissatisfaction becomes generalized. And that means going beyond the current collective actors of the polity to encompass more general objects of the political system, and finally the political system as a whole.

The concept of *generalized* support has been developed on the basis of Easton's (1965, 1975) concept of *diffuse* support, and used in empirical analysis (Fuchs 1989; Fuchs 1993; Fuchs, Guidorossi and Svensson 1993). However, it is to be distinguished from diffuse support in two essential aspects. Easton (1975) posits two sources for the development of diffuse support. The first is mechanisms of primary *socialization*, and the second subsequent *experience* with the performance of actors of the polity. According to Easton (1975, 444-448), such experience is merely a *source* of the development of diffuse support, but this attitude exists only once it has freed itself from this source and become unspecific, and in this sense diffuse. In the case of the concept of generalized support, by contrast, the assumption is that ongoing modernisation processes have led to a diminution in the efficacy of primary socialization and the superimposition of adult experience. As with Easton, experience with the performance of polity actors constitutes a source for the development of generalized support, but in contrast to Easton we assume that this source for the development of attitudes does not disappear in the resulting attitude but

66 In the last resort it naturally depends on the concrete issue which of the defined categories of political performance are involved. If this performance involves, for example, solving a certain problem by state action, then performance category B in Figure 9 will be the relevant one. If, on the other hand, reference is to explaining the electoral behaviour of the citizens, then performance categories C and D will be relevant.

survives, albeit in generalized form. This means, for example, that a positive attitude towards polity structures or towards the polity as a whole is not so much indicative of a diffuse (psychological) attachment to the object as dependence on specific valuation criteria that characterize the attitude as such. These valuation criteria can be expressive, moral, and instrumental in nature. Differing forms of generalized support can be distinguished depending on which of these valuation criteria are used to generate experience⁶⁷, and which therefore constitute the basis for generalization (see Fuchs 1989, 1993). Which of the three fundamental valuation standards for appraising political events is in fact currently dominant among citizens, and which form of generalized support is consequently the politically relevant and effective one is a question research has still to answer. Disregarding these differentiated aspects of generalized support, it does in principle, as *generalized* support, act as a buffer against everyday and concrete dissatisfaction in a comparable manner to Easton's diffuse support⁶⁸. Nevertheless the concept of generalized support involves the assumption of relatively greater dependence on political performance at the process level than is the case with Easton. This assumption also implies that the stabilization of generalized support (or generation, where necessary) is a permanent task of polity actors. This stabilization is founded not only on *what* these actors produce, but also *how* they produce it, that is to say how they bring forth their action products⁶⁹. How the elimination of the fundamental system alternative affects the generation and sustenance of various forms of generalized support for liberal democracies is an important and unanswered question. In the introductory chapter we have already stated our conjecture in this respect. Specific dissatisfaction becomes more rapidly generalized than was previously

67 Experience is almost always had in the light of valuation standards i.e., experience determined purely by cognition is possible only in borderline cases.

68 The concept of generality is defined essentially in terms of indifference towards concreteness and specificity. *Once* generalized political system support forms have been established, they enjoy a certain degree of resistance to disappointment at the level of day-to-day politics due to this indifference. The decisive question, especially for new democracies, is *that* generalized support for these democracies can be developed, and it is a matter involving considerable preconditions, as we know from historical experience.

69 This dimension of the behavioural style of polity actors in producing their action products involves, among other things, the issue of political morality.

the case, but this generalization does not lead to the liberal democratic system as such being called into question, but only to the question whether there are structural alternatives within the system permitting better performance at the process level.

In conclusion we ask how the metatheory of the democratic process is to be categorized as a theoretical venture. Alexander's scientific continuum merely allows location between the poles of 'metaphysical environment' and 'empirical environment', and provides directives on how and from what standpoints such a metatheory can be elaborated. A schema by von Beyme (1991, 346) permits a somewhat more precise categorisation as theoretical approach in the political field. After a comprehensive overview of the 'Theory of Politics in the 20th Century', he simplifies the multifarious theoretical approaches by spanning a two-dimensional space along the two axes system approach/actor approach and macro level/micro level. The two extremities of this space, described by von Beyme as cul-de-sac, are occupied by the autopoietic systems theories (in the systems approach/macro level cell), and orthodox behaviourism (in the actor approach/micro level cell). The metatheory presented here relates in von Beyme's terminology to 'classical systems theory' and to 'rational choice' i.e., two theoretical approaches each of which von Beyme sees as having potential in its own right. One problem in applying the two approaches is the 'leap' from the actor level to the systems level and from the micro level to the macro level and vice versa (von Beyme 1991, 344 et seq.). In the metatheory of the democratic process the attempt has been made to reduce these leaps at least conceptually by means of as systematic an integration of systems approach and actor approach as possible. It remains to be seen how successful this attempt has been. Above all, however, this attempt at integration must prove its worth in empirical studies guided by the metatheory.

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