

# *The Symbolic Uses of Politics*

Murray Edelman

*The Symbolic Uses of Politics* by Murray Edelman (1964) portrays American politics as a symbolic system that is designed to make the mass population believe that they have an important role in the system. Edelman supports this theory through political symbols such as the administrative system, political leadership, setting, and language. He supports his theory with various social science perspectives and theories. Edelman's theory on American politics is important to study in understanding public policy.

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Book Review*

*“Politics, like religion, love, and the arts, is a theme that men cannot leave alone: not only in their behavior, nor in their talk, nor in their writing of history” (Edelman, 1).*

Murray Edelman’s, 1964 book, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics* is a discussion of Edelman’s views on American politics. Edelman argues that American politics is symbolic because it does not benefit nor represent the mass population, yet the majority of American people believe that they are participating in the process. Edelman supports his beliefs through his discussions and theories involving American political symbols. Throughout his discussion of symbols used in politics he interprets four large political symbols being: the administrative system, political leadership, political settings and political language. These symbols bring together his larger interpretation of American politics as being more than a government that is ruled on the will of the people but ruled by an elitist group of administrators seeking to benefit small groups of people (193).

### ***Referential and Condensation Symbols***

To allow the reader full understanding of his political symbols, Edelman begins with a definition and description of referential and condensation symbols. Edelman defines referential symbols as “economical ways of referring to the objective elements in objects or situations: the elements identified in the same way by different people” (6). These symbols allow for a person to look at a statistic or a piece of data and analyze the situation using the given information. He defines condensation symbols as being symbols that “evoke the emotions associated with the situation” (6). Because condensation symbols are based on emotions, examples include a person’s sense of pride for voting or a feeling of patriotism by flying an American flag in front of

their home. It is believed by Edelman that nearly all-controversial political acts are condensation symbols because they symbolize some type of emotional outcome from the public (7).

### *Administrative System*

Administrators and the system to which they belong are symbols of American politics. Administrators and government agencies are able to carry out policies, implement programs, enforce rules and describe regulations. Edelman believes that even administrators fall prey to the politically powerful groups by accepting their views and enacting certain rules and regulations that support these. Furthermore, they protect their actions through these rules (48).

Administrators are involved in a “mutual-role taking” relationship with these elite groups, each giving something to the relationship and each gaining something in return (51). Edelman believes that these relationships occur because “politics always involves group conflicts” (53).

Role taking is a key concept to Edelman’s discussion of the administrative system and he goes into detail about organizational behavior theory and patterns of role taking in organizations. Through this form of mutual role taking, administrative policy often becomes the place that elite objectives are able to come into life (68). In order for these objectives to be supported there has to be a strong relationship between the elite group and the administrators. Edelman supports this with examples at both a federal and local levels, depicting local police officers accepting bribes and with the regulations for determining farmer subsidies. Edelman furthermore states that the hierarchical system of the administrative systems also leads to its ability to continue support with the elitist groups (64-66).

### ***Political Leadership***

Those who are leaders in government have many different roles and responsibilities. Edelman describes governmental leaders as “having the ability to evoke emotional response in large populations”(73). Because of this ability they serve as condensation symbols. These leaders become symbols of the constituency that they serve, whether it is on a local, state, or federal level. The governor is a symbol of his state and the president a symbol of his country. Edelman discusses that these leaders have mass appeal to these populations because of what they symbolize (90). With this appeal they are able to gain incumbency and to continue their relationships with those elite groups that they have already established relationships with. Edelman describes this incumbency as a way to insure national attention (92). He further discusses that those in high federal government positions such as the President, Supreme Court Justices and the majority leaders in congress become more symbolic because of their positions (93). It is in these positions that political leaders become associated with certain symbols. Edelman discusses J. Edgar Hoover as being identified with “patriotism, law enforcement, and security from subversion” (91). Political leaders actions become the symbols that they are identified by.

### ***Political Settings***

Edelman describes political settings as being closely related to the event or situation that is going to take place. “Great pains are taken to call attention to settings and to present them conspicuously...these settings are planned by the arrangers and actors in the event and by what is expected by the audience”(95). One would not expect a local sheriff to have his office in a grocery store (96) nor the United States Supreme Court to meet in an ecstatically unpleasing

place. Edelman discusses the use of setting in the arts as a way to support his belief that political settings are designed to make an audience believe that they are in the scene. He defines political settings as being an “artificial universe” that allows the public to believe that they are involved (97-98). Edelman discusses that the “television screen” creates a false sense of contact because though the President may be on the television, this is still a setting that has been designed by someone else to design a specific setting for those watching (101).

### *Political Language*

Edelman says “the employment of language to sanctify action is exactly what makes politics different from other methods of allocating values” (114). Edelman spends a great deal of time discussing language in relation to politics. He examines the relationship between language and perception and defines what he believes to be the forms and meanings of political language. Edelman discusses the importance of language as being a “necessity catalyst of politics”(117). Through language, larger ideas are turned into frequently used terms such as “liberty”, “freedom”, and “social welfare” (122). Language allows terms to be used by those in leadership capacities and turn these terms like “segregation” and turn a simple world into a “vehicle for expression a group interest” (125). The language that a person with political power uses symbolizes how they are viewed by the public that listens to them (160). Edelman believes that language and dialect directly helps support the authority that a person has (170). Edelman identifies four styles of language hortatory, legal, administrative, and bargaining (133). These styles of language he argues allow for language to be an important symbol in American politics.

## Assessment

Edelman portrays American politics as being nothing more than a combination of a variety of political symbols that he defines throughout his book. Though Edelman does bring to focus some interesting views on the American political process, I would argue that his views do not hold entirely true in today's political scene because of the age of his theory, but some of his more general messages have been able to span the last forty years. His approach to supporting and defining his theories on American politics though brings about a more socially minded analysis that I find very interesting.

Edelman's generalizes American politics as being controlled by a group of power elites, which influence major political leaders to change policies to provide financial gains for these groups. Edelman's message, which I found difficult at first to identify, is supported throughout the book. He uses theories on organizational behaviors, leadership, and politics to bring credibility to his arguments. He crosses many different fields of expertise and draws on his own experiences. His perspective brings psychology and social norms as being an important factor of the study of politics.

His assessment of these groups is mostly directed towards the Federal government, though I would argue that the symbolism transfers even to local governments. Many of the examples that he uses to support his theory are federal policies such as anti-trust laws (35-40) and practices of the FBI (52-53), which includes other branches of government. The part of his analysis that I enjoyed was that he did not simply use the President or Congress, but brought together a series of arguments that transfer from governments and types of governments. For example, his views on the administrative system apply at any level of government and at any

government agency. Edelman discusses the structure of the system as being based on the values of the agency being examined (64).

Though this book was written in 1964, the general messages still apply today. Interestingly enough Edelman uses many examples related to government in times of war and fear, which has extreme importance in today's political scene. Edelman discusses defense contracts as being "the most valuable benefit distributed by the federal government of the United States" (66). He also discusses a view that American society is always in crisis, and that this view is used by politicians and elites for justifying their possible unpopular actions (13). Furthermore, Edelman states "no matter what incidents occur and which of these are reported, they will fit nicely as evidence to support people's preconceived hopes and fears" (13). These hopes and fears are used by the elite groups to accomplish their goals. Some may argue that in the current administration this use of using people's fears to accomplish groups of elite groups has never been so prominent as an effect of September 11<sup>th</sup>.

Because Edelman's arguments involve the who's, the what's, the where's and the language of politics, I found that this book tied nicely into *The Art of the Game* by Theodoulou and Kofinis. Edelman's argument, because it involves so many different aspects of American politics, is able to transfer to many different texts. Though Edelman writes well before a time of cable television and Internet, he does bring light to the effects that newspapers, radio, and the beginning of television have upon American politics and how these contribute to his theory that they are controlled by an elite group of people. Edelman's messages on the media relate to Linskey et al's discussion on the impact of the press on federal policy making. This discussion brings Edelman's argument to a more current discussion through which Linskey et al provide support of the roles that the media has played in the federal government. Edelman's discussion

of group theories also incorporates previous class discussion on Garson's piece, *Group Theories of Politics*. Edelman and Garson have similar views on the roles group theory and it is interesting to note that the second chapter of Edelman's work appeared in the American Political Science Review that Garson reviewed in writing his piece.

Edelman's perspectives on American politics and the symbols that evolve are important in studying public policy. Edelman discusses so many different aspects of politics that his messages are able to complement others views on public policy in the past and currently. When Edelman describes setting as a symbol I thought of the movie, *Wag the Dog*, by Barry Levinson that depicts a President and filmmaker that construe a fake war to take attention away from a scandal in the administration. Edelman goes into such detail about how setting is a political symbol in not just a sense of place, but in the feelings that evoked. Edelman's ability to look past the television as being something intriguing but as another way in which the masses can be guided into believing that they do have a role in politics was very interesting to me because of the wide popularity of the new form of media.

Edelman's views overall on public policy are more pessimistic for a time that politically was much more different then today then what I expected. My personal views that people had a greater sense of patriotism and loyalty the federal government and people cared more about what was happening in politics. A major problem that I had with Edelman's piece was his continual use of "man". He does not suggest any where in his theories the importance of women in American politics. I feel that this is a large fault of the concepts of the book, though this is not due to Edelman's faults but speaks of the time in which this piece was written. I enjoyed that Edelman uses a wide variety of perspectives to support his theory because it brought a social perspective to the analysis that I often was hard to follow.

I also feel that Edelman prematurely draws conclusions in some of his discussions and brings about sometimes more than necessary theories. I think that this would be an interesting concept to apply to current American politics. To apply how language, setting, leadership, and administrative systems are symbols today and to identify the key players. I believe that in doing so, Edelman would have a hard time supporting all of his theory because it does not include lobbying groups such as women and teachers. I would be interested to see if Edelman's views have changed since not only this book, but also in his book, *Constructing the American Spectacle* written in 1988. Though I have only read an excerpt from this piece, Edelman continues to discuss the importance of symbols in American politics. He brings more current topics such as television and media in his later work.

Overall, I found *The Symbolic Uses of Politics* to be an important read for understanding public policy in regards to views on elite groups. I think that Edelman deserves a lot of credit for a well-written piece that covers many theories and ideas of Edelman and other social scientists. In conclusion, I would like to present Edelman's final thoughts on American government. Edelman believes that "what people get from government is what administrators due about their problems, that the view that administrators due things for the mass public is a lie, and that the future effects of public laws and effects are unknown. It is through speeches, gestures, and settings that evoke reassuring anticipations that men's political claims are limited and public order maintained"(193).

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