15.1F: Rational-Legal Authority

Rational-legal authority is a form of leadership in which authority is largely tied to legal rationality, legal legitimacy, and bureaucracy.

Learning Objectives

• Recall the three characteristics of the modern state, according to Weber

Key Points

• Unlike charismatic authority and traditional authority, rational-legal authority derives its powers from the system of bureaucracy and legality.
• Weber defined legal order as a system wherein the rules are enacted and obeyed as legitimate because they are in line with other laws on how they can be enacted and how they should be obeyed.
• The modern state based on rational-legal authority emerged from the patrimonial and feudal struggle for power uniquely in Western civilization.
• A modern state exists where a political community has created an administrative and legal order, binding authority over citizens, and the legitimate use of physical force.

Key Terms

• **authority**: The power to enforce rules or give orders.
• **legal order**: A system where the rules are enacted and obeyed as legitimate because they are in line with other laws on how they can be enacted and how they should be obeyed. Further, they are enforced by a government that
monopolizes their enactment and the legitimate use of physical force.

- **bureaucracy**: Structure and regulations in place to control activity. Usually in large organizations and government operations.

Max Weber: Max Weber and Wilhelm Dilthey introduced verstehen—understanding behaviors—as goal of sociology.

Rational-legal authority is a form of leadership in which the authority of an organization or a ruling regime is largely tied to legal rationality, legal legitimacy, and bureaucracy. It is the second of Max Weber’s tripartite classification of authority. The majority of the modern states of the twentieth century are rational-legal authorities, according to those who use this form of classification.

Unlike charismatic authority and traditional authority, rational-legal authority derives its powers from the system of bureaucracy and legality. Weber defined legal order as a system wherein the rules are enacted and obeyed as legitimate because they are in line with other laws on how they can be enacted and how they should be obeyed. These rules are enforced by a government that monopolizes their enactment, while holding the legitimate use of physical force.

Weber wrote that the modern state based on rational-legal authority emerged from the patrimonial and feudal struggle for power uniquely in Western civilization. The prerequisites for the modern Western state are the monopoly by a central authority of the means of administration and control; the monopoly of legislative authority; and the organization of officialdom, dependent upon the central authority.

According to Max Weber, a modern state exists where a political community has three elements. First, an administrative and legal order that has been created and can be changed by legislation that also determines its role. Second, it must have binding authority over citizens and actions in its jurisdiction. Lastly, it must possess the right to legitimately use the physical force in its jurisdiction.
A FEMA Employee Fills Out Paperwork: Ration-legal authority depends on routinized administration, which often involves a lot of paperwork.

President Barack Obama: Barack Obama, President of the United States, derives his authority from a rational-legal system of laws outlined in a formal document, the Constitution of the United States of America.
Max Weber on Rational-Legal Authority: According to Weber, rational-legal authority is a form of leadership in which the authority of an organization or a ruling regime is largely tied to legal rationality, legal legitimacy, and bureaucracy.