POLITICAL CULTURE

A state's political culture is determined by the cultural norms, values, and beliefs of individuals in that state as they pertain to political thought and action. Thus, political culture has a psychological element to it that extends to the composition of political systems. Because it is easy to employ reductive cultural stereotypes while studying political culture, a scientific study of it necessitates evidence based on relevant data from nationally representative population samples. Understanding political culture can allow for state specific analyses and responses to problems arising out of that culture.

Cultural Differences around the World

Globally, cultural differences reduce down to sacred/secular values, shortened to secular values, and patriarchal/emancipative values shortened to emancipative values. Different nations place varying degrees of importance on secular and emancipative values prompted by particular historical trajectories and the impact of waves of modernisation. More secular orientations are the outcome of Communist, Confucian and Protestant traditions with industrialisation further aiding the secularisation processes. The Protestant tradition has also made nations more amenable to emancipative values with post-industrial modernisation helping along the process. Emancipative values incidentally also have an impact on a country's position along the autocracy/democracy spectrum.

The Historical Roots of the Political Culture Concept

A principal presupposition of the political culture paradigm is that the social structure of a populace contributes to attitudes among its individuals which in turn make a certain kind of political system more accepted than another. As such, there is a direct progression from social structures to personal beliefs to the validity of political institutions and in turn prevailing governments. Hierarchical or vertical social structuring fosters authoritarian attitudes that validate dictatorial rule, whereas horizontal social structures foster egalitarianism that in turn validate democratic rule. Recognition of people as the 'masses' that can affect political change is a concept that, while Greek in origin, was resuscitated with the revolutions of the 1700s which reinstalled people as agents of political change.

Citizens' Democratic Maturity

Civic competence within a culture is emphasised as a concept that can bolster democracy. Democracy is thought to put more demands on individuals than authoritarian rule as the freedom to choose between parties, issues, and opinions of candidates, and participate in elections requires educating oneself and utilising that education for electoral ends, even as participation is voluntary. Moreover, even in limited democratic settings where there is reduced participation, the population must have a sense of the electoral process.

The Allegiance Model of the Democratic Citizen

In addition to civic competence, the model democratic citizen also subscribes to a sense of allegiance to the normative beliefs, institutions, and players of democracy. This allegiance format supports the restriction of citizens' political actions to elite-entrusting forms of participation. For instance, participation in elections whereby legislators (elites) are elected to look out for the best interests of the citizens is elite-entrusting behaviour as opposed to participation in social movements whereby the masses are mobilising directly. This latter form of participation is construed as non-institutional activity of which an ideal citizen would not partake. As representation is a key component principle of democracy, its legitimacy requires party-voter alignments.

Party-Voter Dealignment

Party–voter alignments are a constituent component of representative democracy. As such, while people may change their alignment with a party, they cannot float freely outside the bound of all available alignments. In such a case of party-voter dealignment in which the masses mobilise outside the set institutions of representative democracy, governments are put in situations where they are unable to acquiesce to the demands of the mobilisations. This leads to citizen disappointment over democratic institutions and the subsequent crises of legitimacy for governments. Party-voter dealignment trends such as elite-challenging mass action have generally eroded the allegiance model of democracy.

The Assertive Model of the Democratic Citizen

As a result of elite-challenging mobilisations, e.g. movements for women's rights etc., emancipative values have risen across post-industrial nations and even beyond. However, in societies where emancipative values have become the strongest, there has been a long-term decline in parliaments, the police, and the military but a higher horizontal trust in fellow citizens. In effect, emancipative values in general have made people more liberal in their conception of democracy while simultaneously employing a more critical lens on its workings, as well as being more accepting and open with regard to non-group members.

A Cultural View of Democracy

According to data, the extent to which a country oriented towards democracy during one of the many waves of democratisation was contingent on the salience of its emancipative values. The impulse for democratic freedoms is not considered to be universal but culturally mediated by the growth of emancipative values. Since emancipative values are generally on the rise across the globe, there is reason to expect democratic gains even in countries that have historically tended towards autocratic rule. Understanding that political culture is influenced by secular and emancipative values allows us to formulate a scientific approach to its analysis and to redress any of its deficits or excesses.

Adapted from Christian Welzel and Ronald Inglehart, 'Political culture' in Daniele Caramani (ed), *Comparative Politics* (OUP 2020)

Further Reading

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