

The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations
Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba

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A. Major Arguments

In 1963, the “Civic Culture” project of Almond and Verba was considered groundbreaking for social sciences. It was the first attempt to systematically collect and codify variables measuring citizen participation across five different states. Those variables, based on cross-sectional surveys, measured the qualities used for assessing the degree of political participation of citizens in the United States, Mexico, Great Britain, Germany and Italy. Through their project, Almond and Verba wanted to create a theory of civic culture—a political culture explaining the political involvement of citizens or lack thereof in democratic states.

In their work, the authors discussed the historical origins of the civic culture and the functions of that culture in the process of social change. They compared and contrasted the patterns of political attitudes in the five countries and contended that, across states, a democratic system required a political culture encouraging political participation.

The theory employed by Almond and Verba was based on Harold Lasswell’s personality characteristics of a ‘democrat’ including the following features: “open ego” (a warm and inclusive attitude toward other human beings; a capacity for sharing values with others; a multi-valued rather than a single-valued orientation; trust and

confidence in the human environment; and relative freedom from anxiety.¹ The authors used a methodology of experimentation rather than inferring a theory from the institutional systems prevalent in the discussed states in order to make a valid contribution to the scientific theory of democracy.

Political culture refers to “attitudes toward the political system and its various parts, and attitudes toward the self in the system.”² The political culture of a nation is the particular distribution patterns of orientation toward political objects among the members of the nation.³ It may or may not be congruent with the structures of the political system.⁴ The authors asked if there is such a thing as a political culture: a pattern of political attitudes that fosters democratic stability. They came to the conclusion that a civic culture is a mixed political culture: individuals are not always perfectly active or passive.

In their research, the authors struggled with a discrepancy between the participants’ actual behavior, their perceptions and political obligations. They also questioned the socialization of the citizenry into the civic culture. They asserted that civic culture is not taught in school. Rather, it is transmitted by a complex process that includes training in many social institutions: family, peers, school, work, and the political system itself.⁵ Socialization occurs through the direct exposure to the civic culture itself and to the democratic polity.

¹ Almond, Gabriel; Verba, Sidney. *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1963. p.11.

² Ibid, 13.

³ Ibid, 15.

⁴ Ibid, 21.

⁵ Ibid, 498.

In order to preempt criticism, Almond and Verba stressed that their research did not carry the explanatory power for creation of the civic culture in the newly-created nations; this question was beyond the scope of their research. However, they did not refrain from making an attempt to speculate on this question based on the cases their studied: the civic culture emerged in the West as a result of a gradual political development (based on history and characteristics of the civic culture). It developed as a fusion of new patterns of attitudes, merged with the old ones.

In their work, they distinguished three types of citizen's orientation: parochial (political sleepwalker, not involved, no knowledge or interest in the domestic political system); subject (somewhat aware of political institutions and rules), the participant (possessing a strong sense of influence, competence and confidence in understanding the domestic political system).

As mentioned above, they compared and contrasted five political cultures: Italy – an alienated political culture with low sense of confidence and competence; Mexico – alienation and aspiration with low but positive sense of confidence; Germany – political detachment and subject competence with confidence about the administrative system only; the US – participant civic culture with confident and competent political actors choosing political leaders and administration; the UK – a deferential civic culture.

B. Evidence and Methods Used

Almond and Verba used identical surveys in five countries (the United States, Mexico, Great Britain, Germany, and Italy) with 1,000 samples in each country. They

codified the data into ordinal and interval variables, offering consistency and validity of quantitative methodology. A multitude of statistical tables, however, is supplemented with individual case studies and descriptive methods. The research confirmed their theory of political participation of citizens in democratic states.

C. Points of Interest and Annoyance

Almond and Verba attempted to quantify civic culture—a concept traditionally regarded as qualitative. In the 1960s, it was one of the first such projects in comparative political studies. One can imagine that with the technological advancements of the 1960s, this project could not have been easy to complete. Given this caveat, there are many problems with the data. First of all, their sample counts for only five countries. Furthermore, a thousand interviews in each country can hardly be representative of the whole population.

Forty years later, it would be interesting to see how their findings changed given the political development of the states in question as well as advancements in the statistical methods and tools.

D. Significance and Implications

The passages below show the academic community's reaction to Almond and Verba's project at the time it was written. This is done in an effort to assess the validity of their project relative to the developments in the field of comparative politics in the same time frame. Benjamin Walter voiced the following opinion in *The Journal of Politics* in 1965:

The sampling used in Mexico includes no village with fewer than 10 000 people. This cuts out a lot of Mexico and probably leads to an underestimate of the proportion of parochials actually present in the system. It also helps explain why urban rural cross-tabulation could not be consistently employed. Mexico City was undersampled by half to permit more coverage of other cities, and then the Mexico City interviews were multiplied by a factor of 2.5 to give proportion to the sample. As an improvisation this is probably all right, but it is certainly not the sort of thing to teach one's students. They also have a lamentable habit of averaging together scores on different ordinal scales, a practise that has little besides arithmetical convenience to recommend it.⁶

On the other hand, Stain Rokkan wrote:

This book represent an innovation in the literature of comparative politics: it opens up new perspectives on the theory of democratic politics; it demonstrates the potentialities of a new method of data gathering and analysis; it points to a series of problems for further research and theorizing on the sources of national differences in the character of the relationships between government and the governed."⁷

⁶ Walter, Benjamin. Book Review. *The Journal of Politics* (Vol. 27, Feb. 1965, 206-209)

⁷ Rokkan, Stein. Book Review. *The American Political Science Review* (58/3, Sep 1964; 676-679)