

## **Political Culture**

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Consider the following news stories from across the globe:

- The Russian president proclaims that he will appoint hundreds of political officials who until then had been elected by the people, and no one in the country seems to object.
- The Chinese government sends troops to arrest farmers who refuse to give up their land to state-sponsored developers as China continues to bolster its market economy.
- The citizens of Mexico vote the one-party system out of its 75-year rule by selecting a president from a party on the right in 2000, but now they seem to be leaning toward a leftist president candidate for 2006.
- Almost every week, the British prime minister faces the opposition party leader toe-to-toe in a “question hour” that encourages even members of his own party to hurl insults at him.

How do we make sense of the actions that we read about in the news? The nature of electronic news coverage almost inevitably leaves us with many unanswered questions, and even the most diligent observer is left with the impression that government and politics in most other countries are puzzling enigmas. That is one reason why it is so important to understand political culture, the set of beliefs and values held by citizens that shapes the political system. Through examining this all-important foundation, we can better interpret political events and actions by politicians because they almost always are solidly footed in political culture.

### **Three Levels of Political Culture**

According to a well-known analysis by Gabriel Almond and G. Bingham Powell, political culture exists on three levels: the political system, the political and policymaking process, and policy expectations.

#### **The Political System**

How do people feel about government and politics in their country in general? At its most fundamental level, political culture is shaped by citizens' sense of identity with the political system. Do they have national pride, and do they accept and support decisions made by their leaders? An important element of political culture is *legitimacy*, the belief

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that the government's rule is valid and that it should generally be obeyed. Countries with a long national history generally have an advantage over more recently founded nations, which must convince citizens to develop new political loyalties. However, long histories may be filled with ethnic or religious strife that in turn may foster legitimacy problems. Whatever the challenges, governments tend to function much better if citizens believe in the legitimacy of the political system. It is difficult to measure legitimacy; indeed, we can usually tell when it isn't there, but it is hard to pinpoint when it is. So in political science we look for clues that legitimacy defines the relation between rulers and citizens by looking at the bases of legitimacy that exist in a society. Citizens may grant legitimacy to their governments on several different bases:

- **Tradition**—Citizens may accept a government based on heredity, so that when the ruler dies, the legitimate heir is his son (or in some cases, daughter). In other traditional societies, people have accepted rulers whom they believe have special powers or have contacts with the supernatural. For example, in ancient China people generally followed the orders of their emperors because they believed them to be “Sons of Heaven.” These beliefs help to form a political culture that stabilizes the society and legitimizes the government.
- **Ideology**—A political ideology is a set of beliefs that sets a vision in place for a better society. Ideologies generally criticize the old order (or opposition ideologies), evaluate problems and prescribe their solutions, and try to build public support for their new direction. For example, Marxism criticized capitalism, predicted doom if capitalist ways continued, and envisioned a whole new order based on elimination of private property. Twentieth-century leaders in Russia and China adopted Marxism, which gained support from large numbers of people who participated in mass movements that drastically redefined the dominant ideology and thus the legitimacy in those countries at this basic systems level.
- **Competitive elections and constitutions**—Most modern democracies base their legitimacy on fair, regular, and competitive elections in which citizens have real choices among alternative candidates. These elections, along with other basic political processes, are defined by law. In many countries, a formal constitution sets a blueprint that reflects political beliefs and values of the political culture. Because a democracy is based on the value that people should have an input into government, the constitution must include some channels that link citizens to the decision makers if it is to be accepted as a basis for legitimacy. We can find clues that a government is considered legitimate if people participate freely and in large numbers in elections or if they follow and express support for the tenets of the standing constitution.

- **Public benefits**—Some governments enhance their legitimacy by providing public benefits to their subjects. For example, in the twentieth century, both the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China reinforced their communist ideologies with benefits such as welfare, job programs, and rent subsidies.

### **The Political and Policymaking Process**

A second level of political culture involves citizens' expectations of how government should operate, how political leaders should behave, and how they themselves should participate. In some countries, citizens expect to be actively involved and regularly consulted regarding the business of government, and if they are not, they may decide to throw their leaders out or possibly to question the very legitimacy of the political system. In other countries, citizens are subjects who passively obey the law but do not involve themselves in government. Instead, they leave political decisions up to the leaders. In still other nations, citizens may have no awareness of government and politics at all because they never or seldom come in contact with political leaders or their policies.

Most societies are a mixture of participants, subjects, and parochials (those who have little awareness of government). Generally, the stronger the government is, the smaller the number of parochials, since citizens cannot escape contact with the political system. Strong governments may discourage active political participation (as in large authoritarian regimes), or they may encourage it (as in many modern democracies). However, the success or failure of authoritarian and democratic regimes is often strongly influenced by the political culture. If the people have long accepted passive political roles, it is generally much more difficult to build a viable democracy. Likewise, if people are accustomed to speaking their minds in public, they will almost certainly resist having authoritarian rule imposed on them. So political culture at the process level has many important repercussions throughout the entire political system.

### **Policy Expectations**

What do people expect their governments to do for and to them? These expectations affect the ability of decision makers to make and implement successful political policy. Should political leaders manage the economy? How involved should government be in the lives of its citizens? How much and what kind of support should the government expect from its citizens? The answers to these questions reflect the political culture on a third level: policy expectations.

For example, in some countries, most people believe that the government should ensure that everyone is provided for. Other political cultures hold that individuals are primarily responsible for their own well-being and have few expectations of government in

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providing for the general welfare. This fundamental difference in political beliefs will surely influence how tolerant citizens are of high taxes, subsidies for the unemployed, and government-funded old-age pensions. As a result, citizens of Sweden generally tolerate high taxes in order to enjoy a prosperous retirement, but the political culture of the United States communicates to retirees that Social Security is not enough to fund a comfortable lifestyle.

### Types of Political Culture

It is important to assess the broad influences of political culture in any given political system, but the task is not usually an easy one because values and beliefs vary among people within a nation. For example, some people in a country may believe that religion should play an important role in shaping political decisions, whereas many others may believe in strict separation of church and state. The number and depth of disagreements among citizens within a society form the basis for dividing political cultures into two types: consensual and conflictual.

- **Consensual political culture**—Although citizens may disagree on some political processes and policies, they tend generally to agree on how decisions are made, what issues should be addressed, and how problems should be solved. For example, citizens agree that elections should be held to select leaders, and they accept the election winners as their leaders. Once the leaders take charge, the problems they address are considered by most people to be appropriate for government to handle. By and large, a consensual political culture accepts both the legitimacy of the regime and solutions to major problems.
- **Conflictual political culture**—Citizens in a conflictual political culture are sharply divided, often on both the legitimacy of the regime and solutions to major problems. For example, if citizens disagree on something as basic as capitalism versus communism, conflict almost certainly will be difficult to avoid. Or if religious differences are so pronounced that followers of one religion do not accept an elected leader from another religion, these differences strike at the heart of legitimacy and threaten to topple the regime. When a country is deeply divided in political beliefs and values over a long period of time, political subcultures may develop, and the divisions become so imbedded that the government finds it difficult to rule effectively.

Just how much political culture changes over time is a matter of some debate among political scientists. Some see it as relatively static—a set of characteristics that endure through time and form the basis for accurately analyzing political systems. Others believe that no matter how we categorize political cultures, they are constantly changing, so that

over time, conflictual political cultures may become consensual, and vice versa. Whatever the perspective, political culture is important. So when the Russian president dictates a major change of policy, the Chinese government enforces economic development of rural lands, the British prime minister endures another round of derision, or Mexican citizens take a liking to a leftist leader, you may be sure that political culture is a force behind the stories in the news.

### Teaching Suggestion

An important point to make to students about political culture is that it forms the basis for almost everything else in a country's political system: institutions, leaders' actions, international relations, and current events. One way to make this point is to have students look for examples of political culture in newspapers and/or news magazines. U.S. newspapers that often cover other countries are the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, although other large newspapers may certainly be used. Magazines might include *Time*, *Newsweek*, or *U.S. News and World Report*. Or you could have students search newspapers, news services, or magazines from other countries online, a practice that also exposes students to points of view other than those of the U.S. media.

You might start the process by finding a good example to copy for your students to read and analyze in class. For example, in early 2004 a news article that focused on new restrictions on Iranian elections gave many clues to Iranian political culture. More recent articles about decisions made by British "law lords" also reflect basic principles of British political culture. Once students have the general idea by going through an article that you choose, allow them to search on their own. Assign students to come to class prepared to discuss political culture as reflected in articles that they find on their own.