

Political Culture and Democratic Homeostasis: A Critical Review of Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba's *The Civic Culture*

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Synopsis

This précis provides an overview of Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba's *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations*.¹ It begins by situating the work squarely within the structural functionalist tradition and proceeds to summarize Almond and Verba's argument and evidence. It then notes how their evidence from Italy aligns with the findings of Edward Banfield (1958). It concludes by highlighting some weaknesses of Almond and Verba's structural functionalist approach and by providing a few questions for class discussion.

Background on Structural Functionalism

The political sociology of Almond and Verba (1963) is strongly influenced by sociological structural functionalism. Structural functionalism emerged in the late 19th and early 20th century in the context of intense social change and the emergence of destabilizing mass political movements spurred by industrialization and political enfranchisement. It was the potential disintegration of society at the hands of rapid change that motivated early structural functionalists, particularly Emile Durkheim, to study how societies can maintain social unity.

At the core of structural functionalism lies the concept of social *function* – a term initially developed in Durkheim's *The Division of Labor in Society*. To ask what a function is, posits Durkheim, requires one to “investigate the need to which it corresponds” (1997 [1893]: 11).² Specifically, for Durkheim a formal or informal institution's function is “the correspondence between it and the needs of the social organism” (Radcliffe-Brown 1935: 394).³ Thus in his analysis of the division of labor, Durkheim concludes that “the economic services it renders are trivial by comparison with the moral effect it produces. Its true function, the real need to which it corresponds, is that feeling of solidarity in two or more persons which it creates” (Jones 1986).⁴ In general, structural functionalists posit that if structures and institutions are to survive, they must promote social solidarity, or, once solidarity is achieved, *homeostasis* (system stability). As Radcliffe-Brown argued, “[t]he function of any recurrent activity, such as the punishment of a crime, or a funeral ceremony, is the part it plays in the social life as a whole and therefore the contribution it makes to the maintenance of structural continuity” (1935: 396). An examination of Almond and Verba's *The Civic Culture* reveals remarkable continuity with the foregoing scholarly tradition.

Almond and Verba (1963)'s Structural Functionalist Theory of Political Culture

Where Durkheim perceived a threat to social unity in the industrial revolution, Almond and Verba perceive a similar threat in the regime changes of the second wave of democratization and the military threats of the Cold War: “How can these subtleties and these humane etiquettes [of stable democracies] survive even among ourselves in a world caught in the grip of a science and technology run wild, destructive of tradition and of community and possibly of life itself?” (pg. 7). *The Civic Culture* represents their search for a plausible answer.

I. Building Blocks – Orientation and Political Objects

The building blocks of Almond and Verba's structural functionalist theory are a set of (1) *individual orientations* linked to (2) *political objects*.

Orientation can take three forms: (1) *cognitive orientation* (“knowledge of and belief about the political system, its roles and the incumbents of these roles, its inputs, and its outputs”), (2) *affective orientation* (“feelings about the political system, its roles, personnel, and performance”), and (3) *evaluational orientation* (“judgments and opinions

¹ Almond, Gabriel, and Sidney Verba. 1963. *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

² Durkheim, Emile. 1997 [1893]. *The Division of Labor in Society*. New York, NY: The Free Press.

³ Radcliffe-Brown, Alfred. 1935. “On the Concept of Function in Social Science.” *American Anthropologist*, 37 (3): 394-402.

⁴ Jones, Robert A. 1986. *Emile Durkheim: An Introduction to Four Major Works*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.

about political objects that typically involve the combination of value standards and criteria with information and feelings”) (pg. 14).

Political objects include (1) *the “general” political system*, (2) *the specific roles or structures in the system* (such as legislatures and bureaucracies), (3) *the incumbents of roles* (such as monarchs and legislators), and (4) *public policies* (decisions or enforcements of decisions) (ibid).

II. Putting the Building Blocks Together – Types of Political Culture

Almond and Verba construct three ideal-typical political cultures on the basis of the foregoing building blocks: parochial cultures, subject cultures, and participant cultures.

In *parochial cultures*, exemplified by African tribal societies, citizens have low cognitive, affective, and evaluative orientation towards the four types of political objects. In these simpler traditional societies, there are no specialized political roles and little expectation for political change (pgs. 17; 20). Here, “the individual thinks of his family’s advantage as the only goal to pursue, or conceives of his role in the political system in familistic terms” (pg. 120).

In *subject cultures*, there is high cognitive, affective, and evaluative orientation towards the political system and policy outputs, but orientations towards input objects (like political parties) and the self as an active participants are minimal. Thus orientation towards the system and its outputs is channeled via a relatively detached, passive relationship on the part of the citizen (pg. 17). Subject cultures are most compatible with centralized, authoritarian political structures (pgs. 17; 20). Indeed, for the subject “the law is something he obeys, not something he helps shape” (pg. 118).

In *participant cultures*, members of society have high cognitive, affective, and evaluative orientation to the political system, the input objects, the policy outputs, and recognize the self as an active participant in the polity. Social actors tend to be activist and mobilized (pg. 18). In general, participant cultures are most compatible with democratic political structures (pg. 20). Here, the citizen is expected to have “the virtues of the subject – to obey the law, to be loyal – but he is also expected to take some part in the formation of decisions” (pg. 118).

Almond and Verba note that political cultures rarely conform to the foregoing ideal-types; rather, they tend to be *mixed cultures* (pg. 22). Further, political culture does not always map onto functional political structures: political systems may be characterized by *high congruence* between culture and structure (which engenders allegiance), *weak congruence* (which engenders apathy), and *incongruence* (which engenders alienation).

III. The Civic Culture – Mediator of Democracy’s Contradictions

The civic culture is a mixed culture: it is a fusion of parochial, subject, and participant cultures. The characteristics of the rationality-activist model of democratic citizenship often taught in civics classes (where citizens are informed, active, and rational) are indeed components of the civic culture, but additionally the role of subject and parochial remain dominant. *The participant role has thus been added to the subject and parochial roles*, whereby citizens maintain their traditional, parochial ties (such as church membership) as well as their more passive political role (as subjects accepting of elite decision-making) (pg. 339).

It is this mixed quality of the civic culture that *mediates the contradictions inherent in democratic systems*, namely the tension between government power/effectiveness and government accountability/responsiveness (pg. 341). First, the parochial/subject foundations of the civic culture incentivize *moderation*: “The parochial and subject orientations modify the intensity of the individual’s political involvement and activity. Political activity is but one part of the citizen’s concerns, and usually not a very important part at that” (pg. 339). Thus the citizen in the civic culture is “not the active citizen: he is the potentially active citizen” (pg. 347). This facilitates elite decision-making and effective governance. Yet elites must nonetheless be “kept in check. The citizen’s opposite role, as active and influential enforcer of the responsiveness of elites, is maintained by his strong commitment to the norm of active citizenship and his perception that he can be an influential citizen [...] This may be in part myth [...] yet the very fact that citizens hold to this myth [...] creates a potentiality of citizen influence and activity” (pg. 346).

In this way, the civic culture accommodates the need for *consensus* (which prevents social fragmentation) and for *cleavage* (which organizes politics and renders political activity meaningful) (pg. 358). This tension is negotiated and diffused via the *inconsistency between participatory norms and participatory behavior* (ibid).

More concretely, democratic consolidation emerges from a *stabilizing cycle*, where brief spurts of intense political mobilization (which serve to validate the participatory myth's existence by boosting "the citizen's perception of his own influence") are followed by prolonged periods of normal politics with minimal citizen participation (which serve to promote the government's "effective performance") (pg. 350). In Almond and Verba's own words, this "equilibrium mechanism" results when "an issue becomes salient, activity rises, and balance is restored by a governmental response that reduces the salience of the issue" (pg. 352).

The civic culture is thus a goldilocks concept – a means to overcome the fragility of democracy. For a democratic polity to endure, some orientation (affective, cognitive, and evaluative) to the system is necessary if citizens are not to derive their contingent support for the regime from capricious and unstable material incentives (pg. 354). Yet intense emotional involvement threatens "the balance between activity and passivity" premised on the *low salience of politics* by fostering "the sort of mass, messianic movements that lead to democratic instability" (pgs. 349; 355).

IV. Evidence from the US, Britain, Germany, Mexico, and Italy

To bolster the foregoing theory with empirical data, Almond and Verba conduct a cross-national survey across five countries: the United States, Britain, Germany, Italy, and Mexico. Approximately 1,000 (mostly)-structured interviews were conducted in each country between 1959 and 1960 (pg. 40). Across a variety of measures, the surveys find that the US and Britain most approximate the civic culture, Germany and Mexico produce mixed results, and Italy is in big trouble.

The main empirical regularity that emerges across all five countries is that the more educated have higher levels of *subjective competence* – they feel better able to "do something about a local regulation that they consider unjust," i.e. to affect government decision-making (pg. 162). This is particularly true vis-à-vis local, as opposed to national, government (pg. 141). Men and high-status individuals are also likely to hold higher levels of subjective competence (pg. 167).

Yet the surveys mainly highlight divergences across the five countries. In the 'success cases' of the US and Britain, we find the characteristic civic cultural gap between participatory perception and reality: "Respondents in Britain and the United States manifest high frequencies of what we have called subjective political competence [...] Yet this high estimation of one's competence as an influential citizen is certainly not matched by actual political behavior" (pgs. 344-345). Further, in both countries collective action is normalized: citizens are confident in their ability to rely on both formal and informal groups to influence government policymaking (pg. 157).

By contrast, in Germany, Italy, and Mexico, social/interpersonal trust levels are lower, and any such solidarity rarely penetrates into political relationships. Therefore, citizens' "ability to influence the government in time of need – in particular, to create *ad hoc* political structures to do so – is limited" (pg. 361). This generates a destabilizing incongruence with democratic institutions (pg. 364).

Mexico presents a case of "aspirational" political orientation, where the "level of subjective political competence is relatively high, but is unmatched by performance. This gap between perceived ability to influence the government and actual experience with such influence is also a feature of the civic culture, but the gap in Mexico is much wider than in the United States and Britain" (pg. 363; also pg. 39).

In Italy and Germany "commitment to the political system is largely pragmatic, and is based on little emotional commitment" (pg. 356). The legacy of authoritarian rule in Germany produced a political culture whereby the "passive subject orientation persists and has not yet been balanced by a participant orientation" (pg. 362). The situation is most dire in Italy, which "never really developed an allegiant national political culture in modern times," and where citizens are "thoroughly alienated both as participant and as subject" (pgs. 37; 362; also pg. 38). Unsurprisingly, survey results in both countries find that most respondents believe voting exhausts their participatory responsibilities (pgs. 128-129).

Part of the foregoing divergences may be attributable to political structure: for example, the US and Britain are characterized by substantial local government autonomy and opportunities for local participation, whereas Germany, Mexico, and particularly Italy minimize local autonomy and restrict opportunities for community involvement (pg. 123). Nevertheless, self-reinforcing “feedback” processes between political culture and political structure (pg. 125) produce a ‘chicken-and-egg’ endogeneity problem that is difficult to disentangle.

V. The Difficult Diffusion of the Civic Culture

The problem with cultural variables as opposed to institutional ones is that the former do not easily lend themselves to engineering. Indeed, the civic culture is transmitted through a complex socialization process “that includes training in many social institutions – family, peer group, school, work place, as well as in the political system itself” (pg. 367). It is bolstered by direct exposure to the civic culture and to the democratic polity, and its acceptance by individuals is often part of an inter-generational transfer of values (pg. 368). Finally, in the US and Britain, the civic culture emerged only gradually and organically within a relatively stable sociopolitical context (ibid).

For these reasons, Almond and Verba are not optimistic about the prospect of diffusing the civic culture to new democracies: “The problem in the new nations of the world is that such gradualness is not possible. There is great demand for participation in politics from many who were only recently parochials” (pg. 369). Promoting education may be a good place to start, but education “can only create some of the components of the civic culture” (pg. 370). Some means of inculcating loyalty to the political system – through a unifying, shared experience (such as a revolution) or the actions of a charismatic leader – may be coupled with the profusion of modernizing and participatory institutions, namely the mass media, political parties, and voluntary civic organizations (pg. 372). Yet although “any approach to modernization has within it some of the seeds of the civic culture,” a ready-made formula for creating the civic culture is non-existent (pg. 373).

From Verba and Almond (1963)’s Italy to Banfield (1958)’s Montegrano

The survey evidence that Verba and Almond present for Italy maps onto Banfield’s field research in the fictional southern Italian village of Montegrano outlined in his 1958 book, *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society*.⁵ Here, the local farmers do not “expect to be listened to by the authorities”; “there are no organized voluntary charities”; attendance at church mass is minimal; and “some find the idea of public-spiritedness unintelligible” (pgs. 17-18). Further, participatory political objects – like political parties – are of little importance (pg. 23).

The parochial culture described by Almond and Verba is brought to life in the maxim Banfield attributes to the Montegranesi: “Maximize the material, short-run advantage of the nuclear family; assume that all others will do likewise” (pg. 85). It is assumed that everyone evades taxes where possible; that all political officials are corrupt; that priests are thieves and hypocrites (pgs. 92; 94; 18). In such settings, it is no wonder that alienation vis-à-vis democratic institutions would be high while political participation would be low (and even considered “improper!”) (pgs. 86-87). Indeed, collective action and political organization – which are “to an important degree unselfish” and require social trust that extends beyond the family network – are largely non-existent in Montegrano (pg. 89).

A few elements of the subject culture outlined by Almond and Verba is also present in Banfield’s account, for in Montegrano the “weak” (i.e. the peasants) “favor a regime which will maintain order with a strong hand” (pg. 96). Hence the historically strong support for fascism amongst the rural regions of the Italian south – for “by enforcing the laws rigorously, it protected them” from the vicissitudes of a disorderly society (ibid).

Note that Banfield’s repeated characterization of the Montegranesi as “amoral familists” renders explicit a theme running through the structural functionalist literature from Durkheim to Almond and Verba: social solidarity is, first and foremost, a *moral good*, whereas social disintegration – what Durkheim referred to as *anomie* – is a *moral bad*.

A Critique

In his classic 1970 article on conceptualization in comparative politics, Giovanni Sartori delivered a scathing critique of the structural functionalist approach to political sociology. For Sartori, the structural functionalist is a prime perpetrator of conceptual stretching, for “even when we deliberately ask “what is,” we are invariably

⁵ Banfield, Edward. 1958. *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society*. Glencoe, IL: The Free Press.

prompted to reply in terms of “what for.” What is an election? A means (a structure) for electing office holders. What is a legislature? An arrangement for producing legislation” (1970: 1047).⁶ While Almond and Verba are not the worst offenders, they certainly engage in conceptual underspecification vis-à-vis the notion of a “political system” (1963: 14). Here, the authors climb the ladder of abstraction not by decreasing the number of clearly-defined attributes comprising the conceptual class, but by rendering the concept vague (or, more to the point, by failing to define it in the first place!). Is a “political system” synonymous with “regime type” (Collier & Levitsky 1997),⁷ or is it more proximate to the Marxist concept of superstructure? Is it something altogether different?

Secondly, one may add the charge of conceptual exhaustion to Sartori’s conceptual stretching critique. Almond and Verba take great pleasure in conceptually deconstructing and re-compartmentalizing political society, only to leave some of the resulting conceptual building blocks aside to gather dust. The tripartite distinction between affective, evaluative, and cognitive orientations, for example, is seldom leveraged outside of their introductory chapter. Similarly, their four-part typology of political objects is subsequently collapsed into input institutions and political outputs. One wonders whether, via these simplifying acts, Almond and Verba sought to avoid becoming the victims of their own imperial acts of branding.

Thirdly, despite Almond and Verba’s attempt to demonstrate that the “connecting link between micro and macropolitics is political culture” (pg. 32), there is almost no role for micropolitics – for individual agency – in their account. This is a shortfall of most structural functionalist narratives, but there was hope that by interviewing individuals Almond and Verba may have been able to strike a more constructive balance. Yet their conclusion is that a bundle of face-less social institutions and inter-generational transfers of values, mediated by the overarching structure of the “political system,” socialize individuals into the civic culture. Relatedly, by failing to develop and test either agent-based microfoundations or clearly specified causal mechanisms, the endogeneity problem plaguing analyses of the relationship between culture and institutions remains unresolved. Indeed, the authors fall back on the claim that political culture and political structure are mutually constitutive – not the juiciest of insights.

Finally, an uncomfortably Anglo-Saxon normative predilection seems to underlie Almond and Verba’s structural functionalist theory, likely due to *The Civic Culture*’s cross-pollination with the modernization theories of the time. Almond and Verba achieve implicitly what Banfield (1958) does explicitly: to decry the moral poverty of the non-Anglo-Saxon political cultures while singing the praises of the civic culture of Britain and the US. If only an Anglo-Saxon political culture can effectively mediate democracy’s contradictions, then the only way for democratic institutions to take root is via the cultural diffusion of Anglo-Saxon political values. A prescription for cultural imperialism may thus lie hidden within *The Civic Culture* – and that is surely cause for concern.

Questions for Class Discussion

1. Conduct a treasure-hunt for ‘the role of individual agency’ in Almond and Verba’s *The Civic Culture*. If you find the treasure, where is it? If not, where should it be?
2. How is Almond and Verba (1963)’s contribution different from the modernization theories of Lipset (1959) and Lerner (1958)?
3. To what extent is Almond and Verba (1963)’s concept of civic culture synonymous with Anglo-Saxon culture? At what point does a critical assessment of non-Western culture degenerate into Eurocentrism or cultural imperialism?
4. Suppose you are one of the members of a Constituent Assembly in a recently democratized state drafting its new democratic constitution. Are there any insights that Almond and Verba (1963) provide that may be helpful for the purpose of constitutional design?

⁶ Sartori, Giovanni. 1970. “Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics.” *The American Political Science Review* 64 (4): 1033-1053.

⁷ Collier, David, and Steven Levitsky. 1997. “Democracy with Adjectives: Conceptual Innovation in Comparative Research.” *World Politics* 49 (3): 430-451.