Civic Culture

Civic culture is a set of political attitudes, habits, sentiments and behaviour related to the functioning of the democratic regime. It implies that although citizens are not necessarily involved in politics all the time, they are aware to a certain extent of their political rights and also of the implications of the decision making process that affects their life and society. Both political awareness and participation are supposed to be relevant to the stability of a political regime. By contrast citizens´ withdraw from political life has consequences not only for their ability to get what they want from the political community, but also for the quality of democracy. Civic culture involves, therefore, some level of perception of the republican character of modern politics, and adds a psychological dimension to the concept of citizenship.

The concept of civic culture is part of a long tradition of thought that investigates the nature of democracy from a historical perspective. It refers to the role of political tradition, values and culture for the achievement of democratization and the stabilization of a regime. Its rationale goes back to the thinking of ancient political philosophers such as Aristotle, but in modern and contemporary times also Machiavelli, Montesquieu, Tocqueville, J. S. Mill, Weber and Bobbio, among others, have discussed whether a set of specific political attitudes, convictions and behaviour are a necessary and/or sufficient condition for the success of modern democracies. The question is controversial, but it has never disappeared from the debate about the necessary conditions to achieve the "good government", e.g., a political regime committed to the ideal of full human realization.

While Aristotle and some Roman philosophers were mostly concerned with the excesses of the original models of democracy and popular republics, Montesquieu and Tocqueville focused on the links between the "spirit" of political institutions and laws and the "habits of the heart" that drive people forward towards greater public cooperation and associational life. Aristotle spoke of the political goodwill necessary for a political regime to be able to fulfil its mission, but also of public virtues such as civic partnership and political restraint. Tocqueville claimed that the success of modern democratic regimes depended on an "(individual's) self interest rightly understood" and asserted that an open and free public life is not a natural given, but depends on human will; he also emphasized the importance of a sense of moderation and self-restraint in the process of political participation.

Contemporary concern with civic culture is due mainly to two political phenomena of modern times: first, the excesses of political revolutions (e. g., the French, the Paris Commune and the Soviet), and second, the collapse of democracy in Europe in the period between World Wars I and II of the last century, as was the case with the Weimar Republic. Democracy cannot fulfil its promises if there are no **democrats;** and if the nature of the democratic regime does not imply an excess of political participation – which sometimes may degenerate into violence against minorities and opponents-, neither does it predicate a cynical or apathetic public, which withdraws from public life which itself could lead to abuses of power. As a system of government both **of** and **for** the people, but not directly **by** the people, democracy demands public involvement, political participation and vertical, horizontal and social accountability. The existence, independence and autonomy of civil society are integral parts of it. Moreover, a widespread tolerance for a plurality of views and interests, and a widely distributed

sense of political efficacy, trust in government and mutual trust among the citizenry are also seen as key elements in effective civic culture.

Civic culture as political culture

The most important contemporary contribution to the development of this theme appeared early in the 60´s in the work of American political scientists, Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba. Their book, *The Civic Culture* demonstrated the connection between specific political attitudes and the historical experience of democratic stability. In the context of the process of decolonization and re-democratization which emerged after World War II, the authors were concerned with the emergence of a new world culture involving positive and negative political tendencies in countries which had become democratized as a result of external pressure, such as Germany, Italy and Japan; and also in Third World nations recently freed from their colonial status, but not necessarily from their traditional political heritage. They wanted to know whether those countries had the necessary conditions to give birth to effective democratic regimes, or old authoritarian or antidemocratic values would prevent those countries from establishing free, competitive and effective political systems. The continuing existence of a number of authoritarian regimes in Europe (Spain, Portugal and Greece) and similar experiences in Latin America, Africa and Asia in the 50s, 60s and 70s showed how right their original concern was.

According to the logic of political culture theory - in which some critics found that psychological approaches had too great an influence - the effective performance of a democratic regime would require some kind of accommodation between the elitist

conception of the role of political leaders and some level of citizens´ involvement in the realm of politics. While what later on was defined in terms of the strategic role of political elites in making governments govern - through their political initiatives and performance - the new theory maintained that there was also an area of collective political convictions and modes of participation to be taken into consideration. The latter was said to provide the context for the emergence of the former. The microdimension of politics, perceived at the individual level, should be congruent with its macrostructures, seen at the general level. Incongruence of political attitudes and the behaviour of masses and elites, on the one hand, and the functioning of democratic institutions on the other could produce a situation in which there were incomplete, untrustworthy or dysfunctional political systems. Looking at the survival of democracy in Britain, United States and some European countries in the inter-war period, Almond and Verba discussed what kind of citizenry was needed to achieve a proper balance of power and create the ability of a stable democratic regime to be responsive.

This theory held that to work according to its principles, the democratic process should involve a healthy tension between civic obligation and actual civic performance. It required appreciation by the public of the virtues of democracy as compared to its alternatives. In order to submit to the law, to mechanisms of its enforcement and to authorities, citizens should give both formal and informal consent for the functioning of the political system; but at the same time they should have a proper sense of their own duties. In this respect, both the subjective and objective political competence of citizens were considered to be of great importance. Such a political culture depended also on levels of mutual trust among citizens. This notion, which is long established, referred to the fact that interpersonal trust is necessary to stimulate common action directed

towards the realization of collective goals. Citizens should acknowledge their obligation to be part of the system and also believe that political institutions would be accessible to their participation, but at the same time they should be selective if their performance fell short of what was required in any sense. Then how could one balance political activity and passivity with allowing political leaders both to exercise power and to respond to the demands and preferences of citizens? A political division of labour – strongly criticized by both communitarian and republican defenders – was seen as an essential condition in allowing the political system to work effectively, to make political choices, and in encouraging voters to evaluate the performance of both political leaders and government coalitions.

Politics presupposes conflict and antagonism between parties and groups in open democratic systems, the theory implied, but these forces should be contained by a general national loyalty and support for the political system. The civic culture approach presupposes also that a political culture congruent with a stable democracy involves a high degree of consensus concerning the legitimacy of democratic institutions and the content of public policy. Political culture has been defined as a set of attitudes, beliefs and sentiments which give order and meaning to the political process and which provide the underlying assumptions and rules that govern behaviour within the political system. Expanding on this definition, Almond and Verba distinguished between three different types of political orientation: **cognitive,** referring to knowledge of and belief in the political system, its roles, incumbents, inputs and outputs; **affective,** translated as feelings and sentiments about the political system, its roles, personnel and outcomes; and **evaluative,** based on judgments and opinions about political objects, particularly, the input and output processes, its incumbents and their performance.

The political culture of the five nations that they compared – Italy, Great Britain, Germany, Mexico and United States – was characterized in terms of two key attitudinal variables: commitment and involvement. The first looks at individual attitudes towards the political system, distinguishing between **allegiant**, **apathetic** and **alienated** political orientations, the second measures attitudes towards participation, differentiating between **parochial**, **subject** and **participant** attitudinal types. Civic culture would combine both a participatory and a deferential perspective of politics, forming a mixed political culture in which action and non-action, obligation and performance, conflict and cooperation, would be balanced and combined. Citizens would have to mobilize certain particular civic virtues to be able to evaluate issues relevant to them and their society. These civic virtues would then help to avoid both the overload of the political system and an excessively deferential polity, which could give way to new forms of authoritarianism.

<center>Critical views of the concept</center>

The concept of civic culture had a considerable influence on the development of political analyses in the late 50s and early 60s. Conceptually linked with the so-called behavioural revolution, its proponents wanted to signal a movement away from the study of formal institutions – supposedly typical of the so-called old-institutionalism – towards the study of informal behaviour in order to see politics as it is in real life. In the 70s, however, the cultural approach fell out of academic fashion and came under strong criticism for being conservative, static, tautological, ignoring real power relations and incapable of explaining social, political and cultural change. The view of political culture and democracy presented in *The Civic Culture* rapidly became the subject of

considerable and rather heated debate. Its critics said it was deterministic, ideological and inconsistent with the real nature of liberal capitalistic societies. But the strongest charge against the theory was about the direction of causality in the relation between culture and political structure. The British political philosopher Brian Barry and the American political scientist Dunkwart Rustow claimed that Almond and Verba failed to explain the assumption about the congruence between political structure and the culture needed for democratic regimes to succeed. The culture of politics is a consequence, not a cause of institutional structure, they argued. People believe in a system through learned processes based on "habituation" and "accommodation" with the logic of democratic institutions, and not the contrary. But neither Barry nor Rustow did any empirical research to prove their point. At the time he was making his criticism, Barry thought there was not enough research to allow consistent conclusions about the controversy to be drawn, and suggested that, in order to advance the debate, scholars should study the phenomenon of transformation of political regimes to be able to grasp the real sense of causality – at the time, however, there were no regimes undergoing such a change.

Political values and orientations certainly cannot exist in a vacuum, but critics were missing the point - as Arendt Lijphart pointed out. Almond and Verba allowed causality to work both ways; in other words, political culture influences institutional design, but it is also influenced by institutional quality and its functioning. Moreover, the critics did not explain the normative basis of institutional choices, something else which was not to be taken as a given. In other words, institutions are chosen to carry out specific functions in order that societies can work as people want them to, and unless one assumes that institutional choices are disembodied and independent of human desires,

ideals and objectives, they do refer to normative goals, which is part of political tradition and culture. Individuals' continuing commitment to political principles – such as the right to contest power or participate in the political process – is a central aspect of the process of institutional choice. Rational motivations involved in such choices are contextualized by power relations, political culture and tradition.

The concept has also been criticized for its supposed inability to deal with political and cultural change. Citizens are not automatons, passively receiving and internalizing political values and norms, said the critics, and although political culture is transmitted from generation to generation, it is not transmitted unchanged, nor is it transmitted randomly or without question. Cultural transmission is an active and responsive process, which is continuously being negotiated by individuals. The adult political experience over time, rather than just political socialization during childhood, is crucial to explain the ways political views are shaped. This means that experiences with institutions do matter, but critics of The *Civic Culture* never acknowledge that its authors did actually draw attention to the fact that previous political analysis had underemphasized the crucial role of experience within political systems. The study was also criticized for not properly considering the process of competing norms and values within a society. Marxist critics or liberals such as Carole Pateman also claimed that they did not deal with class cleavages in their study, and were therefore not able to grasp the processes of political cultural changes occurring as a consequence of the dispute for power and political hegemony in contemporary societies.

Between the 1970s and the 1990s the civic culture approach became squeezed between two extremely prestigious and critical perspectives of contemporary political science:

neo-institutionalism and different theories that investigate the success of a democratic regime on the basis of the political and economic performance of governments, political leaders and parties. While the first excludes any reference to a normative approach to explain the design and functioning of institutions, the second emphasizes the effects of economic and political performance on it. Both approaches contradict the notion that an individual's internalization of values and cultural norms is relevant in explaining the outcomes of a political system.

Consistent responses to those critics appeared, however, in the mid 90´s when the complexity of processes of political transition in different countries around the world demanded more sophisticated explanations, able to mobilize other factors than those only relating to institutions or political performance. The question now was the quality of democracy, not just its mere existence.

The renaissance of civic culture

Recent explanations of democratization are once more returning to the cultural approach. These studies are less deterministic and based on a probabilistic perspective about the influence of a political culture. They also assume that political structures and civic culture have a mutual influence. One of its main motivations is the perception that the simple transformation of institutions that usually characterizes the end of processes of political transition is not enough to explain the different outcomes of democratization. The fact that in different parts of the world there are democratic regimes which do not fully uphold the rule of law, the principles of civil and political rights and mechanisms of accountability has directed researchers´ attention once again

to the role of attitudes, convictions and behaviour in explaining the variance of the quality of democracy.

This renaissance of the civic culture approach is principally due to two groups of contributions. The first is the work of Robert Putnam on the role of social capital in social and political development. Social capital – bonding, bridging and linking - is defined as networks and social norms of trust and reciprocity that strongly connect individuals to the common interests and goals of their community. Putnam has shown with his work on Italy and USA that social networks based on mutual trust and the desire of individuals to act in common is decisive for the achievement of social goals and for the development of a democratic institutional environment. While in the South of Italy traditional ties do not work towards achieving openness in public life and form part of a cycle of political abuse, corruption and governments characterized by low performance, in the North a long and cumulative tradition of cooperation and mutual trust has engendered higher levels of social and political participation, and allowed regional governments to perform much better. Social trust derived from the accumulation of social capital makes citizens more co-operative, reciprocal and willing to associate and act collectively. Thus Putnam's contribution has emphasized how different objective and subjective conditions affect institutional development.

The second refers to the extensive work of Inglehart about the relevance of post-materialist values from a human development perspective, which involves the consolidation of attitudes which contribute towards democratic structures. Inglehart revised the theory of modernization and argued that social and economic changes profoundly affect the traditional political culture of contemporary societies in such a

way that individuals leave behind, as time passes, their attachment to survival values and develop means of self-expression, which enable them to have more autonomy and independent patterns of relations with political authorities. Basing their studies on the six waves of the World Values Survey, Inglehart and Wezel tested, on the one hand, the impact of values, over time, on the existence of effective democracies and, on the other, the influence of democratic institutions and the length of time a system of government with democratic values is in place According to them, outcomes clearly demonstrate that while values are decisive in determining the existence and duration of democratic institutions, the latter have only a weak influence over time in creating a civic culture; indeed under the influence of other variables their effects disappear altogether. They claim that studies have confirmed some basic assumptions of theories of political culture even when other variables are included in explanations of democratization processes.

At the end of the 90´s and the beginning of this century, the works of Pippa Norris, Richard Rose and Doh Shin also became associated with the resurgence of the civic cultural approach. Using different arguments, they reacted to the analyses that in the 70´ and 80´s were deeply concerned with the decrease of political trust in Europe and the USA, and also to the enormous difficulties faced by newly democratized countries in creating effective democracies. In the book *Critical Citizens,* Norris and her collaborators combine the institutionalist approach with the recognition that citizens´ political experience is crucial in explaining their attitudes and behaviour. Shin, Rose and others argue that ordinary people's support for a democratic regime is a learning and re-learning process in which both their values and normative perspectives have a role to play as well as their rational perception and evaluation of the functioning and

performance of institutions. In both cases, without opposing the perspectives of civic culture and institutionalism, they emphasize the importance of the adult political experience of citizens in explaining the conditions under which normative expectations about the role of institutions interact with rational evaluations of institutional and governmental performance. The critical view of citizens is interpreted as part of the new civic culture.

Conclusion

The Civic Culture remains a model of scientific inquiry, allowing researchers to test, refine or reject their hypotheses. As Aaron Wildavsky said, Almond and Verba made their evidence speak on a profound theoretical issue, and their empirical work allows others to test their assumptions. Presently the concept is undergoing a renaissance, but this does not simply imply going back to the original approach. New developments have incorporated a more flexible interpretive and less formalistic perspective, integrating both institutional and cultural approaches which explain how citizens are involved in politics and how they influence it. Civic culture is considered to be relevant, not only for the stability of any democratic regime, but also for its quality.

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See also: democracy, political culture, political attitudes, political socialization, social trust, civic participation, quality of democracy.

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