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The Good Society
An Introduction to Comparative Politics

Alan Draper Ansil Ramsay

Second Edition

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they think and behave. Individuals can step outside accepted cultural norms and imagine different ways of thinking. Third, we should be careful about making sweeping statements such as "Muslims believe," or "Chinese believe." There are well over a billion Muslims and a billion Chinese in the world. They disagree among themselves about what it means to be Muslim or to be Chinese. Finally, culture and political culture are never the sole factor explaining differences in politics and capabilities among countries. Factors such as the countries' level of economic development, distribution of power in society, the kind of institutions that prevail, and the quality of leadership also matter.

THREE APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF CULTURE AND POLITICAL CULTURE

In this section, we examine three ways of using culture and political culture to explain political similarities and differences among countries: the social character, congruence, and social capital approaches.

The Social Character Approach

The **social character approach** begins with the assumption that culture "is crucial in understanding how societies and political systems function and how and why they differ from one another."[6] Deeply held cultural beliefs shape the way people see the world and how they behave. These ideas and values often originate in religious traditions, but become embedded in institutions and therefore persist long into the future.[7]

The social character approach proposes to explain political differences between countries. The political scientist Seymour Martin Lipset uses it to explain why the United States adopted a presidential form of democracy and an aversion to state intervention in the economy and society, while Canada adopted a parliamentary form of democracy combined with greater acceptance of state intervention. According to Lipset, the differences stem from "the two countries' values and the ways they affect behavior, beliefs, and institutional arrangements."[8] The American Revolution, in his view, was the historical turning point that set them on their differing paths. American political elites held revolutionary beliefs and were willing to fight to free themselves from British control, while Canadian elites chose to remain part of the British Empire. These differences were sharpened as British loyalists in the United States emigrated to Canada in order to live under a government whose beliefs matched their own.

For the American revolutionaries "the objectives of the good society" were "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." They believed these objectives would be threatened by a strong state. Their views were reinforced by a religious tradition characterized by the separation of church and state and the existence of voluntary association among believers. In contrast, Canadian

leaders defined the good society in terms of "peace, order, and good government."[9] They believed a strong state was needed to guarantee peace and order. Their political values were reinforced by a hierarchical religious tradition with close links between church and state.

The values of Americans and Canadians found institutional expression in different forms of government. The American Constitution reflected the Founders' skepticism regarding the state. They devised a complex system of checks and balances intended to make it difficult to legislate and to use the state to solve social problems. In contrast, Canadians, being more sympathetic to the state, chose a parliamentary form of government that permitted leaders to appropriate the state's powers more easily. Prime ministers and their cabinets had relatively unchecked power and did not have to worry so much about legislative support or judicial approval.[10]

A big strength of the social character approach is its ability to provide a rich sense of countries' cultural nuances and how people think about politics. It draws upon a wide range of evidence—historical and religious documents, histories, public opinion surveys, novels, and popular culture—to understand how values and beliefs fit together to form coherent patterns of meaning that bind people together. However, the approach has its limitations. First, it requires researchers to have considerable knowledge of the culture of the countries they are comparing. A second limitation is that it can be used effectively only when countries are very similar to each other. Ideally, they should differ only on the dependent variable one wants to explain and the independent variable that allegedly causes the differences in the dependent variable. Canada and the United States come close to meeting this requirement. Both are large, affluent, democratic countries that were former British colonies. They differ in regard to political institutions, Lipset's dependent variable, and in political culture, his independent variable. Lipset makes the case that the difference in political culture accounts for the difference in the forms of democracy they chose. The problem is few countries match up so well. As a result, the social character approach does not lend itself to comparison of large numbers of countries. If we want to make such generalizations, we have to proceed differently.

The Congruence Approach

One of the possible candidates is the **congruence approach**. Its basic claim is that a lack of congruence, or match, between a country's political culture and its institutions is likely to create political instability. That is, for the sake of stability democratic political institutions require a democratic political culture, while authoritarian political institutions require an authoritarian political culture.[11] According to this approach the Nazis were able to take power in Germany in 1933 mainly because of the mismatch between the Weimar Republic's democratic institutions and widespread authoritarian attitudes within the German public. As one author put it, "democracy failed in Weimar Germany because it was 'a democracy without democrats.'"[12]

Most scholars who use the congruence approach have focused on two big questions: what kind of political culture is necessary to maintain stable and effective democracies, and how does this kind of political culture emerge? To answer these questions, political scientists rely on carefully structured interviews with representative samples of each country's population to discover what they believe about politics. Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba's *The Civic Culture,* published in 1963, was the pioneering study using this approach. The researchers surveyed citizens' political attitudes in five democracies: Britain, the United States, Germany, Italy, and Mexico. They concluded that the political cultures of the United States and Britain came closest to approximating the kind of "civic culture" they believed was most suited for stable, effective democracy. Interestingly, Almond and Verba's civic culture did not exhibit the characteristics extolled in civics textbooks of the era. According to the latter, the democratic ideal was one in which every citizen is politically well informed and actively involved. Almond and Verba found that this pattern did not hold true, even in the most developed democracies. Many citizens were "**participants**" who voted, paid attention to politics, and were aware of how politics affected their lives. Typically, however, they read about politics and voted at election time, but did little beyond this. Most participants were not active in politics as family, friends, work, and social activities occupied most of their time and thought. Other citizens in these democracies were "**subjects**" who paid little attention to politics, obeyed laws, and were not politically active. A small number were **"parochials"** who had little or no knowledge of politics, no interest in participating, and were often ignorant of the ways in which politics affected their lives. Almond and Verba concluded that the civic culture with its mix of participants, subjects, and parochials was actually preferable to the ideal political culture of the civics textbooks. The mix of citizens helped maintain a balance between keeping a government responsive to citizens while allowing it to govern without undue disruption.[13]

Recent research suggests the kind of political culture Almond and Powell thought necessary for preserving democracy may not be helpful in creating it or making it effective. Drawing on a much larger base of evidence from data gathered by the World Values Survey over nearly 30 years, Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel argue that an activist political culture is necessary to make and maintain effective democracies. In their view, a vigorous democracy requires the development of certain **self-expression values**: valuing freedom of speech, tolerance toward people with different lifestyles, a willingness to voice one's opinion and challenge authorities, and a belief that others can be trusted. These values matter because they ensure citizens' right to speak out even when they say things that are deeply offensive to others' fondest beliefs. They also provide the motivation for citizens to challenge authoritarian regimes by signing petitions, demonstrating, and joining protest movements. Such actions have led to the collapse of authoritarian regimes in many countries in recent decades, including South Korea, the Philippines, and Poland. Finally, self-expression values continue to be important after democracy is achieved by making leaders responsive to public demands. Inglehart and Welzel find a

strong correlation between the strength of self-expression values and the level of effective democracy.[14]

At the personal level, according to Inglehart and Welzel, the rise of self-expression values does not bring greater selfishness. Instead, it appears to "widen the circle of others with whom people build up solidarities." The finding is surprising because so many people equate individualism with selfishness. The researchers argue that "individualism does not necessarily destroy solidarity, but leads to a different kind of solidarity.[15] Self-expression values create bridging rather than bonding behavior. **Bonding behavior** occurs when people identify with their in-group based on ethnicity, race, language, or religion and discriminate against outsiders. They belong to a collective. A familiar example of bonding behavior occurs among students during sporting events with a school that is their arch rival. This is epitomized in the title of a recent book about the Duke–North Carolina basketball rivalry, *To Hate Like This Is to Be Happy Forever.*[16] In contrast, **bridging behavior** is based on mutually agreed interests and empathy for others. It requires seeing others as individuals who make choices, not as a community of people who are like others in an in-group.

The congruence approach to political culture differs considerably from the social character approach. The social character approach sets out to *discover* a society's political culture and how its elements fit together to affect political institutions and processes. It attempts to understand a country's political culture as the citizens of the country understand it. In contrast, the congruence approach *constructs* political culture from answers to survey questions about what people believe and value. Scholars can use these answers to construct a profile of an individual country's political culture, to track changes in values and opinions over time, or to test hypotheses using dozens of countries. This approach has two main strengths. It is based on empirical data about what individuals say they believe rather than inferring what people believe from historical studies, reports of country experts, novels, or journalistic accounts. Moreover, the approach has contributed to our understanding of the kinds of beliefs needed to help create and sustain a stable, effective democracy. But the congruence approach does not directly address what has become one of the central issues in political science; namely, why individuals often fail to cooperate to achieve goals that almost all of them agree are desirable.

The Social Capital Approach

The **social capital approach** takes up this challenge. It seeks to explain why people manage to collaborate to attain shared goals in some societies, but find it extraordinarily difficult to do so in others. **Social capital** is the "ability of members of a group to collaborate for shared interests." It is based on "trust among people in a society and their ability to work together for common purposes."[17] "At heart, social capital is a simple concept—that is, relationships matter."[18] Friendship, for example, is an example of one of the most important relationships people have. But relationships can extend beyond friendships to large numbers of people who do not know each other. Trust enables

large numbers of people to cooperate to achieve goals that no individual could achieve alone.

Greg Mortenson's best-selling book *Three Cups of Tea* describes the author's promise to build an elementary school in a remote area of Pakistan in return for the villagers' kindness in nursing him back to health after a failed mountain-climbing attempt. He eventually fulfilled his promise not only in this one village, but in dozens of others as well. The schools enabled children to become literate and numerate and go on to higher education. One girl who followed this path sought to become the director of a hospital that would serve the entire region, a goal that would have been unthinkable for her earlier. The schools that helped her and other rural Pakistani children achieve their potential required the cooperation of thousands of people in Pakistan and the United States, who contributed labor, money, or skills to the effort. Much of the book is devoted to explaining how Mortenson was able to motivate and mobilize them to act.

Lack of cooperation, on the other hand, can prevent people from reaching their goals even when everyone agrees on their desirability. In Russia, for example, tax collection agencies are notoriously corrupt. As much as the average Russian may want to end this corruption, doing so is difficult. Most Russian citizens refuse to pay taxes because they think their tax money will go into officials' pockets instead of toward desirable goals such as building schools to educate their children and clinics to keep them healthy. They also refuse to pay taxes because they know most of their fellow citizens are not following suit. Why should they pay if no one else is? The same logic works for tax collection officials. Many might prefer to be honest, but they don't want to be suckers, giving up the extra income that their corrupt counterparts would continue to collect. The result is a stalemate in which Russian citizens continue to refuse to pay taxes and officials continue to be corrupt.[19] As a consequence, only 26 percent of the taxes citizens are supposed to pay is collected. The Russian tax collection problem is an example of a **social dilemma**, a situation in which "even if everyone realizes that cooperation would be beneficial for all, it will only come about if the agents trust that (almost all) others are going to cooperate."[20]

In Sweden, by contrast, 98 percent of the taxes people are supposed to pay actually gets paid. Unlike Russians, Swedes believe other citizens are paying their taxes. They also believe government officials will use their tax money for public purposes and not steal it. These differing perceptions of Russian and Swedish citizens are confirmed by international rankings of public sector corruption. In 2009, Russia was ranked as one of the most corrupt countries in the world, while Sweden was ranked as one of the least corrupt.[21]

The lesson here is that what people do is shaped in part by what they think others are doing. If they think their fellow citizens are cheating, they too are likely to cheat. If they think fellow citizens are honest, they are likely to follow suit. Once these patterns of behavior become established it is very difficult to change them. As one expert on these problems in Latin America put it, "It's a

vicious cycle that is very hard to break. People don't want to pay taxes because they say government doesn't deliver services, but government institutions aren't going to perform any better until they have resources, which they obtain when people pay their taxes."[22]

Achieving important goals requiring the cooperation of large numbers of people over a long period of time requires **generalized trust** in a society. Generalized trust is the belief that most people can be trusted, not just one's family members or close friends. It is the most essential element of social capital. It is also an essential part of a democratic political culture because "it clearly indicates an inclusive and tolerant approach to the population at large."[23] Generalized trust is based on the norm of **generalized reciprocity**, or the norm that if one does something for others, they will reciprocate sometime in the future. This is different from an immediate exchange of favors based on the premise, "I'll do this for you now, if you do that for me now."[24] Generalized reciprocity in a society creates large amounts of social capital. This makes it possible for individuals to cooperate to achieve goals that no individual working alone could attain. It also enables them to achieve their goals much more efficiently. Someone who wants to buy a book can give his or her credit card number to Amazon.com, trusting that employees will not steal their credit card information and that the book will arrive in a timely manner. The level of trust required to make internet commerce work can be contrasted with the lack of such trust in Nigeria. In the 1990s, hotel clerks there wrote down the serial number of each piece of paper currency handed to them to pay for a hotel room because they trusted no one. They suspected everyone was out to cheat them by giving them counterfeit money.

Generalized trust in a society can affect how institutions perform, but state institutions and policies also shape levels of trust.[25] Democratic state institutions and policies that were established after World War II in Germany helped reshape its political culture from one supportive of authoritarianism to one supportive of democracy. The behavior of judges, police, and other civil servants dealing directly with the public are especially important in affecting levels of cooperation and trust.[26] Where persons in positions of authority ignore ordinary citizens with impunity, and demand bribes to perform public services that should be done as a matter of course, citizens understandably do not trust their government. This was the case for a young mother in India who had just given birth to her first child in a public hospital. The nurse told her she would have to pay the equivalent of a $12 bribe if she wanted to see her baby. This is a small amount in the United States, but it was a considerable amount for the new mother's family, whose husband earned less than a dollar a day. The woman finally got to see her baby after her mother-in-law promised to pawn a gold earring to pay the bribe. Not surprisingly, many poor people in India do not go to public hospitals to have babies delivered.[27] They prefer to have the least possible contact with government officials. They do not trust officials for good reasons and have low expectations for them.