

Chapter 7: Political Culture

1. What is Political Culture?

- Definition: Political culture refers to the long-lasting values, beliefs, and attitudes that shape how citizens view politics and government.
- Unlike public opinion, which changes rapidly, political culture is more stable as it forms over generations. (Social contract?)
- Think of it as the “DNA” of a political community: it frames how people see authority, participation, and citizenship.

Explanation:

“Public opinion tells us what people think today, this week, or this month. Political culture tells us what they have believed, often for centuries. It’s the background music of politics that rarely stops playing.”

2. Sources of Political Culture

- History: wars, revolutions, colonial legacies.
- Economy: capitalist vs socialist traditions.
- Religion: Protestant ethic in U.S., Catholicism in Latin America, Buddhism in Asia.
- Folkways: customs, habits, myths of nationhood.

Example:

“Americans often resist government programs like healthcare reform because the culture emphasizes individualism and suspicion of big government. By contrast, Scandinavians are comfortable with state welfare because their culture sees government as a collective protector.”

3. Types of Political Culture (Almond & Verba)

- Parochial – people don’t expect government to do much; politics is distant (e.g., rural tribal societies).
- Subject – citizens are aware but passive; they obey, but don’t participate (e.g., authoritarian systems).
- Participant – people feel they can and should influence politics (e.g., Western democracies).

Explanation:

“These types aren’t rigid categories. A country can have all three at once, depending on groups and regions. But the stronger the participatory culture, the more sustainable democracy becomes.”

4. Subcultures and Conflict

- Within nations, subcultures may emerge such as ethnic, religious, or linguistic groups.
- Can enrich democracy, but also cause fragmentation.

Example:

“Canada’s Quebecois movement reflects a distinct political culture within Canada. Their slogan *Maîtres Chez Nous* (‘Masters in Our Own House’) shows how subcultures shape politics.”

5. Discussion Prompt

“Do you think political culture changes easily? Or is it so deeply rooted that even revolutions cannot erase it?”

Chapter 8: Public Opinion

1. What is Public Opinion?

- Definition: Public opinion is the immediate view of citizens about leaders, policies, and issues.
- It is more volatile than political culture. It changes with events, media coverage, and leadership.

Explanation:

“If political culture is the climate, public opinion is the weather. It changes quickly, and sometimes unpredictably.”

2. Characteristics of Public Opinion

- Shaped by class, education, religion, region, ethnicity, gender, age.
- Often emotional, sometimes poorly informed.
- Can be unstable: today people may support intervention abroad, tomorrow they oppose it.

Example:

“After 9/11, Americans overwhelmingly supported the war in Afghanistan. But years later, public opinion shifted to viewing it as a mistake. The culture of security remained, but the specific opinion about the war changed.”

3. Polling and Measurement

- Modern polling uses random sampling and scientific methods.
- Problems:
 - Leading or unclear questions could mean distorted answers.
 - Low knowledge among respondents.
- Famous polling mistakes:
 - *Literary Digest* 1936 wrongly predicted FDR’s loss. *The magazine wrongly predicted Franklin D. Roosevelt’s loss to Alf Landon because it surveyed only car owners and telephone users who were mostly wealthier Americans. This created a biased sample and led to one of the most famous polling failures in history.*
 - Truman vs Dewey 1948: polls stopped too early. *Many polls predicted Thomas Dewey would defeat President Harry Truman. But pollsters stopped collecting data weeks before the election, missing Truman’s late surge of support. The famous headline “Dewey Defeats Truman” became a symbol of polling mistakes.*

Explanation:

“Polls can tell us a lot, but we must be careful. They’re snapshots, not crystal balls.”

4. Public Opinion and Democracy

- Leaders must pay attention, but not be enslaved to polls.
- Sometimes governments shape opinion rather than follow it.

Example:

“When Nixon announced his China visit, public opinion quickly shifted in favor. This shows leaders can sometimes lead opinion, not just reflect it.”

5. Discussion Prompt

“Should leaders always follow public opinion, or should they sometimes go against it for long-term national interest?”

Chapter 9: Political Communication

1. The Role of Media in Politics

- Media are the bridge between leaders and citizens.
- They shape what people know, what issues are important, and how they interpret events.

Example:

“FDR’s ‘fireside chats’ in the 1930s bypassed newspapers and spoke directly to Americans, creating trust during the Great Depression.”

2. The Mass Media and Politics

- TV became the dominant medium in the 20th century.
- Politics began to resemble marketing as candidates were “sold” like products.
- Consultants crafted soundbites and images to control perception.

Explanation:

“Think about presidential debates: what we remember are not long policy details but single phrases like Reagan’s ‘There you go again.’ Media turns politics into a drama.”

3. The Internet Revolution

- The Internet democratized communication, i.e., anyone can broadcast views.
- But this freedom also caused problems:
 - **Polarization** --- people become more divided into opposing camps (for example, liberals vs. conservatives).
 - **Echo chambers** --- people mostly interact with others who already share their views, so their beliefs are reinforced instead of challenged.
 - **Misinformation** --- false or misleading information spreads easily, making it harder for the public to agree on facts. Decline of traditional media leading to weaker common reference points.
- Put simply: while the internet gives everyone a voice, it also makes societies more divided and misinformed.

Example:

“During the Iraq War, the rise of blogs allowed citizens to challenge mainstream reporting. Today, social media has amplified that trend, but also spread fake news.”

4. Key Theories

- Two-Step Flow: messages pass from media → opinion leaders → public.
Simple takeaway: Media → Opinion Leaders → Everyone else.
- Elite Media: a few prestigious outlets (NYT, Economist) set the tone for broader debate.
Simple takeaway: Elite media act as agenda-setters for other media and politics.
- Agenda-Setting & Framing: media tell us what to think about, and how to think about it.
- Simple takeaway: Agenda-setting = choosing topics. Framing = shaping meaning.

Explanation:

“When media repeatedly cover climate change as a ‘crisis,’ public urgency increases. If they cover it as a ‘debate,’ urgency decreases. Same issue, different frame, different reaction.” (Securitization?)

5. Discussion Prompt

“Do you think the internet has strengthened democracy by giving everyone a voice, or weakened it by spreading misinformation and polarization?”