

Understanding why the United States differs

In reading for this paper many different questions was posed regarding the means and methods that is the origin of the two articles. The first article I read was "The nature of citizenship in the United States and Great Britain: Empirical Comments on Theoretical Themes".¹ Basically the authors boil the issue of defining citizenship down to two different views, contractual and communal. In terms of the two nations, the U.S. is known to have a contractual form of citizenship and the U.K a more communal citizenship. The strong feeling of individualism and "the American creed" reflects this contractual vision of American citizenship.

The reason why the authors chose U.S. and U.K. as representative to explain and understand what constitutes and how people reflect upon citizenship is the similarities the both nations display. These similarities are such as the format of the society as liberal-democratic, both empowered by advanced and dominant economies. The authors raise the "bill of rights" and the constitution as clear indications of a political framework that the U.K. is lacking. At the same time they parallel this statement by additional differing variables, such as geographically, religiously and that the U.S. is a "mega-democracy". None of these statements has any follow ups as in what they prove or why they are important for the outcome. I also miss a clear definition of what a "mega-democracy" actually is in comparison to a democracy other than geographical size or population.

When it comes down to querying the actual focus groups a cognitive psychology method is adopted. They state the case that not only is the question a matter of just asking the people involved *what* they think about their rights but they also must take into consideration *how* the persons think about these matters. They have decided to use focus groups even though, as they themselves admit, it is a very complicated task to extract general opinions from the study of focus groups. Many of the downsides are mentioned

¹ Pamela Johnston Conover; Ivor M. Crewe; Donald D. Searing, "The nature of citizenship in the united states and great britain: Empirical comments on theoretical themes, The journal of politics, Vol. 53, No. 3. (aug., 1991), pp. 800-832

in the article however hardly any methods or solutions regarding how to battle these shortcomings in the empirical method.

When analyzing the output from the focus groups they used three key concepts to understand the answers: “rights, duties and citizen identities”. When looking upon the civil rights concept they easily extracted proof that settled the very mindset they already had when starting out this. Overall a lot of the questions and the analyzes feels very “aimed” towards proving the statements made in the beginning of the paper, that the U.S. citizen had a very contractual mindset whilst the citizens in the U.K. shared more of a communion spirit in their view of citizenship. Of coarse there were voices to argue the opposite but generally the analyzes defined what they set out to prove.

The American citizens put more focus on the civil rights parts of answering while the U.K. citizens oriented their answers towards the issue of social rights. When asked about the meaning of rights the Americans thought of the meaning as something the government is obliged to hand each citizen, while the English saw it not as something given automatically but instead something you fight for.

When discussing the issue of identity several interesting points made it through in the analysis. The British referred back to historical and cultural values, a community that tied people together through common perceptions. The Americans didn’t make such a complicated case of citizenship, basically if you live in on American soil and are acknowledged by the state, as in have rights, you are American.

The most common involvement in civil politics in Sweden on the other hand, is by referring to the fact that we are the world’s most taxed people (which I have yet not found any proof of, it’s a way of describing the numbers, but there are plenty of different ways to do that). The prime fact that makes a state a state is the right to user violence, on the other hand, the prime fact that makes a state run at all, is taxation. Since every state in the world has there own tax-politics and methods for distributing and collecting tax instead of one unified and universal way of dealing with it. Therefore there must be a

connection between the political climate and policy-making and the way taxation is made. At least that is the claim of Sven Steinmo, which has written the second article I have read, “Political institutions and tax policy in the United States, Sweden and Britain”.² In his article he comments on the fact that the redistribution of the taxes works well and overall does not come as a burden. He compares three countries that according to him are similar enough to be able to extract information, on the other hand, as different as needed to represent valid statements in comparative politics. These three countries are United States, Sweden and Britain. One quick glance at the countries chosen it’s hard not to get the feeling that he has tried to build a representative stock with United States as the largest economy in the world, with aggressive corporate climate, Britain with the legacy as the “workshop of the world”, today a central actor in terms of banking among other things, and finally Sweden. Sweden gets to represent the modern country with stable economy; growth and prime focus on the welfare and technology.

In the case of Sweden, famous for their high taxes, he quickly points out the interesting fact that they have surprisingly low corporate taxes. Though you are taxed at high levels as a citizen, companies in Sweden can benefit from low taxation-pressure. Also the economical structure in the society promotes savings and investments in capital stock. It could be appropriate to point out that the figures used in this article is more then 15 years old so in some cases the accuracy of today might be off, however the arguments made might still valid.

United States on the other hand, is also a liberal pro-corporatist state such as Sweden but with many important differences as well. For example Sven displays the fact that corporate taxation in U.S. is very high in comparison to Sweden whilst individual taxation is in comparison very low. The laws regulating economy and taxation in particular are complex and confusing.

² Sven Steinmo, Political institutions and tax policy in the United States, Sweden and Britain, World Politics, Vol. 41, no. 4. (jul., 1989), pp. 500-535.

Britain has a third model of taxation where different taxation models are based on political parties that implement their specific models when in control of the government. This gives me the impression that actual tax-payments is more or less a constant surprise from year to year for the citizens. Both Britain and U.S. has an economic structure that promotes constant cash-flow which is opposite to the models presented in Sweden.

After laying the stage as such, Sven shows how these differences in economic politics reflects the political system and the differences in citizens in each of the three countries. The low individual taxation in the U.S. is once again a direct consequence or effect of the individualism and “creed” mentioned earlier. No government is supposed to tell any citizen what to do or what to pay; on the other hand this reflects the social welfare programs and governmental community-services, which is a rare thing. The climate is rather that individuals build and achieve together, without interference of the government. Charity, donations and a sense of common good replace large parts of the welfare system represented in Britain and largely in Sweden. In these countries much of the point of paying tax is to get the many back in terms of welfare and community services. This leads to a lacking confidence in a general consumption tax, which is present in both Britain and Sweden, however never has rooted itself in the U.S.

My understanding of the articles is that they are both interesting reading, but lacks in methodology in the sense that they don’t provide me with enough proof of the overall statements. Both of them proves their points, but leave me hanging with a sense that I’m missing out on something. Both articles feel a bit constructed in that they pose a statement and then spend most of the article trying to prove it with different examples. A much more intriguing reading would have been to perform similar comparisons but left the actual consensus open. It is interesting though, to see how both the authors decide to describe and explain the U.S. and it’s citizens. Both have a hard time getting their head around it since a general opinion becomes so vague it hardly explains anything if all variables are taken into consideration. And that sums both articles up pretty much, a lot of interesting information and sub-theories were sacrificed in the line of finding general conclusion.