Political Culture

1. **What is Political Culture?**

Political culture is about deep beliefs and values toward the political system.

System of empirical beliefs, expressive symbols, and values that defines the situation in which political action takes place.

The political culture of a nation is determined by its history, economy, religion etc.

* 1. **Political Culture and Public Opinion**

Political culture differs from public opinion:

- Political culture is concerned with deep values and beliefs, and these form the underpinnings of legitimacy for the state itself.

- Public opinion is concerned with immediate views of leaders and public policies. It seeks responses to current questions.

There is some overlap between the two, especially with respect to the social science methods used to study them. Surveys are a particularly important tool.

The original assumption about political culture was that it never changed and was permanent, while public opinion changed quickly.

However, there are factors that can cause changes in political culture within a country: periods of indecision, instability, and chaos within the state result in the weakening of the state, while periods of stable and efficient government solidify legitimacy.

Public opinion that is held for a long time can turn into political culture.

* 1. **Participation in America**

Almond and Verba argued that America was the model of civic culture. Many questioned how this could be true considering low voter turnout rates and low numbers of people participating in politics.

They offer a “sleeping dogs” theory of democratic political culture: they say that citizens are like sleeping dogs and will be roused to anger by governmental misdoing and then will vote to throw bad politicians out. Hence, leaders usually work to keep the public passive and quiet.

This helps explain low turnout rates punctuated by spikes in turnout.

As such, democratic politics is about a psychological connection between leaders and voters that tends to restrain officials: leaders need to believe that if they make voters mad, they will lose their jobs. As such, democratic political culture does not require high levels of turnout.

It is the potential and not the actual participation that makes a democratic culture.

1. **The decay of Political Culture**

Political culture in advanced democracies growing more cynical and voter turnout is declining with the steepest drop in Japan. The United States has also experienced a decay in political culture following the Iraq war and the 2010 bank bailouts.

The decay of American political culture is related to the development of the polarizing culture wars in the United States between liberals and conservatives which has seen politicians exploit the growing gap between liberals and conservatives in the United States.

Some political scientists fear that if the gap continues to grow, political stability is at risk.

Robert Putnam in his work Bowling Alone noted that there has been a marked decline in the willingness to form associations in the United States. Others argue that associational life is still vibrant in the United States, most of all among college students.

This raises the question of whether the growth of distrust is bad for democracy.

Putnam clearly thinks so, but others argue that growth of distrust in government is natural and not necessarily bad.

Politicians promise more and more but cannot deliver which leads to distrust. Higher education levels are making citizens more aware of this gap between promises and actions and they are much more willing to criticize the corrupt, giving the leaders a “threat”. Consequently, the decline in political culture is really the growth of critical citizens.

1. **Elite and Mass Subcultures**

Contrary to popular conception, political culture is not monolithic or uniform. There is a lot of internal variation within political cultures.

DEF: *subcultures are minority cultures within the mainstream culture.*

Generally, there is variation between the mass or mainstream cultures and elite cultures as well as variation among minority subcultures.

When it comes to mass versus elites, we know that elites tend to be much more interested in and likely to participate in politics.

This tendency increases with elite education and leads to increased levels of political competence and efficacy. The poor are far less likely to participate, in part because they lack confidence, skills, and feel powerless.

This leads to an irony of democratic politics:

Democracy allows everyone to participate equally, yet only a few people choose to participate.

Government policy responds to those interests, so democratic government is not government by the people: rather, it is government by the people who choose to have their voices heard.

Ex. Calvinism

Calvinists believe in predestination and one of the signs that they had been saved by God was that they were actively contributing to their community through their work. In “The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism” Weber argued that the Calvinists need to reassure themselves through their industry was an important factor in the growth of capitalism in Northern Europe: they built business that generated wealth but at the same time lived thrifty lives since they reinvested any surplus and doing so, fueled capitalism.

Hence, for Weber capitalism, at least the initial phase, came from a theological source.

1. **Minority Subcultures**

Minority subcultures can form in politics when a group has strong enough differences from the mainstream culture.

African Americans form a minority subculture in the United States. Not all subcultures have to be ethnic, though.

Across the world, there are minority subcultures that engage in various forms of political resistance because they dislike being ruled by the dominant culture.

- The struggles in Quebec and the Basque region of Spain are good examples.

When these subcultures become too distinct, they can threaten the existence of the state itself.

The question is, to what extent should states go to integrate minority subcultures?

In France, the national government worked to turn peasants into Frenchmen and build a national political culture through the centralization of the school system.

In the United States, most cultural integration was done voluntarily, with help from the educational system to create a mainstream culture in which all the different subcultures could find a space.

There is still a great deal of discussion regarding this topic, as witnessed by the ongoing struggle in the United States over the idea of multiculturalism.

Ex. Political subculture for the Barcelona Futbol Club and Catalanist Independence

This Catalanist tradition underlies the club’s motto, Més que un club, “more than a club”. In fact, Barça has become such a powerful nationalist symbol that many Catalans support it as a kind of emotional surrogate for the state they do not have. That helps explain the outsized passion the club mobilises. But lately, the club has helped give prominence to the referendum, both at home and worldwide. In 2012, fans in the Camp Nou have chanted, “Let us vote”, and some have sung songs or waved banners for independence.

This is a good example of a political culture than connects society, identity and political expression.

1. **Political Socialization**

Nobody is born with political values; rather, they are things citizens learn over time in the process of socialization (*the learning of culture*), either because they are thought or because they are assimilated by imitating others.

Hence, political socialization teaches political values and specific usages, and therefore political socialization is crucial to political stability.

* 1. **The Agents of Socialization**

Political scientists have identified five main agents of socialization although there are most likely more.

THE FAMILY:

Parents are the most influential and most children grow up adopting the same political values as their parents. Children accept parental values unconsciously and uncritically and may retain them for all their lives. (religion plays a role too)

Often other attempts at socialization will fail if they are at odds with the beliefs of the children's parents.

Kids who felt like they had a voice in decisions at home growing up have a greater sense of political efficacy as adults.

THE SCHOOL:

Values are also taught at schools where it is done deliberately.

History is a tool used to inculcate students with feelings of pride and patriotism. Education may be unsuccessful if their message is at odds with what family and religion teach.

The amount of education people have also affects political attitudes: the more education they have, the greater their sense of commitment to the community.

PEER GROUPS:

Peer groups, friends, and playmates also influence our political values. This influence strength is increasing as the traditional family structure declines.

THE MASS MEDIA:

The mass media is also gaining influence, but many fear that this influence is negative.

Robert Putnam argues that watching TV makes people passive and unlikely to participate in community and group activities.

Mass media may be unsuccessful if their message is at odds with what family and religion teach, but at the same time, it might also reinforce other forms of socialization.

THE GOVERNMENT:

The government itself is a form of socialization: its activities are intended to display the government to the public to build support and loyalty (ex. parades, flags, soldiers etc.)