Almond & Verba, eds. *The Civic Culture Revisisted*

tpavone@princeton.edu

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1   Citation

Almond, Gabriel, and Sidney Verba, eds. 1980. *The Civic Culture Revisited*. Boston, MA: Little, Brown.

2   Abstract

Some fifteen years following the original publication of *The Civic Culture*, this collection of essays, edited by Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, seeks to retrospectively discern the intellectual heritage, and assess the criticisms, of the original work. Gabriel Almond traces the intellectual heritage of the "civic culture" to classical Greek thought, to enlightenment and liberal philosophy, and to the modern sociological writings of Max Weber. Arend Lijphart and Sidney Verba, on the other hand, are more concerned with assessing and responding to critiques of *The Civic Culture*, ranging from the fact that it represents a cultural determinism (a false critique), that it is not adequately rationalist and parsimonious (a misguided critique), that it extrapolates national characteristics from individual-level survey evidence (a valid critique), to the fact that the project overextended itself in trying to conduct five full-fledged case studies (a valid critique).

3   The Intellectual Heritage of *The Civic Culture*

Where did the concept of a "civic culture" come from? Its origins date back at least to classical Greece, where Aristotle posited that "the best attainable form of government is the mixed form in a society in which the middle classes predominate. Mixed government is one organized on both oligarchic and democratic principles, hence giving some representation in governing to both the rich and the well born as well as to the poor and the base" (ibid: 3). This conception mirrors Almond and Verba's formulation of the civic culture as a mix of parochial passivity and modern participant activism (ibid: 24).

The enlightenment and liberal theories developed from the 17th century through the 19th century were essentially cultural theories, positing that democratization would be achieved via the spread of scientific, secular knowledge and rational thought (ibid: 6). Yet with the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 and the turn to Fascism in Italy and Germany in the 1920s and 1930s, respectively, the question arose: If the march of historical progress was in the direction of democracy, how can one explicate the rise of "antienligthenment ideologies?" (ibid: 9). This was the same question that tickled Almond and Verba and prompted their writing *The Civic Culture*: What were the cultural traits of enduring democracies versus those suceptible to breakdown?

For an answer, Almond and Verba drew inspiration from Max Weber, who argued for an ""emphatic" science. . . in which attitudes, feelings, and values were important explanatory variables" (ibid: 11). Almond and Verba thus turned to the nascent field of survey research, conducting surveys of approximately 1,000 individuals across the United States, the United Kingdom, Mexico, Germany, and Italy to ascertain their affective ties to the political system as a whole, to political parties, elections, and the bureaucracy, and to themselves as political participants (ibid: 26). *Inter alia*, they found that "[t]here was in Britain and the United States a higher incidence of organizational affiliation and activity, as well as a more widely distributed sense of cooperative competence, than in Germany, Italy, and Mexico" (ibid: 24). They also found that "education in the formal sense does not necessarily produce the affective and evaluative components of a civic culture, such as civic obligation and trust. These attitudes and values seem to be significantly affected by national and group historical and life experience" (ibid).

4 Addressing Criticisms of *The Civic Culture*

One of the most frequently-leveraged critiques of Almond and Verba's work is that it amounts to a cultural determinism, wherein political structure is epiphenomenal of cultural attitudes. Yet Almond and Verba interpreted the values fostering a civic culture not just as independent variables, because there is a mutually-constitutive, endogenous process of cross-pollination between political structure and the civic culture: "the criticism of The Civic Culture that it argues that political culture causes political structure is incorrect...It is quite clear that political culture is treated as both an independent and a dependent variable, as causing structure and as being caused by it" (ibid: 29).

Another frequently-cited critique of *The Civic Culture* is that it embraces an overly open-ended cultural conception of why individuals behave the way they do, without considering how rational choice frameworks provide a more powerful and parsimonious theory of democratic stability. Almond responds that "[s]urely the rational self-interest of social class and of ethnic and religious groups is a powerful dynamic illuminating political movements and conflicts, and contributing significantly to historical outcomes. But patriotism, community loyalty, religious values, and simple habit and tradition obviously enter into the explanation of political structure and legitimacy" (ibid: 30). Here, Almond draws heavily again from Weber, who posited that there exist three distinct types of social orders: (1) rational-legal orders, where officialdom is obeyed because it is selected and acts according to written, rational, enforceable rules; (2) traditional orders, where rulers are obeyed because they have been selected according to immemorial conventions; and (3) charismatic authority, an extraordinary and transitional order characterized by a belief in the superhuman qualities of a leader (ibid: 11).

Some critiques of *The Civic Culture*, however, are not easily dismissed. One particularly salient criticism is referenced by Arend Lijphart, namely "what Stein Rokkan has criticized as the "strong nation orientation of the survey design" and the tendency to present "straight comparisons between total national cross-sections." A more detailed analysis of differences within the five countries might have been interested for its own sake" (ibid: 42). Furthermore, this approach leades to an individualistic fallacy, where micro-level units of observations (individuals) are probed for evidence that is then generalized to a macro-unit of observation (the state) (ibid: 45). Sidney Verba conceded this point, and provided a further insight into why generalizing from survey evidence to the state-level was potentially imprudent: "Insofar as basic political attitudes respond to specific political events, the attempt to generalize about such attitudes across nations is made more difficult" (ibid: 400).

A final critique which stuck concerns the magnitude of the study and the adequacy of the case selection choices. Although originally planning to survey Sweden as a fifth case, the lack of a domestic survey agency prompted Almond and Verba to select Mexico as a case study instead. Yet in the late 1950s and early 1960s "Mexico appears to be a weak case, because it is doubtful that this country can be regarded as fully democratic. Dahl does not include it among the world's polyarchies" (ibid: 44). Sidney Verba indeed concedes that "[o]ne incautious aspect of The Civic Culture was its scope. Five nations was five times as many in previous studies of political behavior using national samples" (ibid: 396).