

# Robert Putnam, *The Beliefs of Politicians*

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## 1 Citation

Putnam, Robert. 1973. *The Beliefs of Politicians: Ideology, Conflict, and Democracy in Britain and Italy*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

*Note: This summary was derived on the basis of two reviews of Putnam's book: Suzanne Jacobitti (1974) [Journal of Politics Vol. 36: pp. 503-505] and Werner Levi (1974) [Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science Vol. 412, p. 165].*

## 2 Abstract

Robert Putnam's *The Beliefs of Politicians* (1973) seeks to track where Almond and Verba's *The Civic Culture* failed to go: Namely, towards exploring political culture not by probing mass political opinion, but by assessing elite political opinion. Professional politicians, after all, are more likely to hold a sophisticated, coherent set of political beliefs than the average citizen. He proceeds via a comparative analysis of the political and democratic attitudes of Parliamentarians in Britain and Italy. In both cases he finds that holding a coherent political ideology is uncorrelated with dogmatism and unwillingness to compromise - this tendency is related more clearly to a politician's conception of society as either conflict-ridden (a view held by most Italian politicians) or harmonious (a view held by most British politicians). Finally, British MPs hold a distinctly more Anglo-Saxon, liberal conception of democracy compared to Italian MPs, who are more likely to hold a more Continental, social democratic conception of democracy.

## 3 Details

Methodologically, Putnam draws his comparative inferences on the basis of open-ended, semi-structured interviews with Parliamentarians in Britain and Italy (93 Members of Parliament in Britain and 83 *deputati* of the Italian Parliament). The interviews probed Parliamentarians' views regarding (i) their ideological political style, defined as a politician's tendency to "conduct politics from the standpoint of a coherent, comprehensive set of beliefs" ranging from ideological to pragmatic; (ii) their "cognitive predisposition" regarding whether society is best regarded as harmonious or conflict-ridden; and (iii) their operative ideal of democracy as a proxy of the political values they espouse (Jacobitti 1974: 504). To ensure a more objective assessment of the Parliamentarians' interviews, interview transcripts were coded and assessed by two independent coders.

Putnam draws a number of intriguing inferences from his interviews. First, self-professed ideologically motivated politicians were not more likely to also be dogmatic, to espouse partisan hostilities, or to be opposed to compromise compared to self-professed pragmatic politicians (Jacobitti 1974: 504; Levi 1974: 165). Overall, however, British politicians were more likely to be self-professed pragmatists than Italian politicians (Levi 1974: 165). In fact, a Parliamentarian's willingness to compromise is a more direct function of his/her views regarding whether society should be optimistically be regarded as socially harmonious or conflict-ridden. British politicians, on average, held more positive assessment about society and its inherent harmony, and were equally more willing to compromise; Italian politicians, on the other hand, held more pessimistic views about society which stressed its Hobbesian nature and proved somewhat more dogmatic. This confirmed the stereotypical "calmer nature of Britain's politics compared to the Italian

experience” (Levi 1974: 165). Finally, Putnam found that British and Italian Parliamentarians differed in their conceptions of the ideal of democracy: Whereas British politicians stressed liberty and procedure, aligning with a more liberal conception of democracy often baptized as the Anglo-American democratic tradition, Italian politicians stressed equality and participation, aligning with a more social democratic conception of democracy often baptized as the Continental democratic tradition (Jacobitti X: 504).

#### 4 Critiques

Jacobitti critiques Putnam for not emphasizing enough the positive function served by the Continental social democratic ideal in countries like Italy: “It may well be that in countries lacking the British tradition of *noblesse oblige* (such as the United States and probably Italy), the only check to naked oligarchy is an elite political culture which values equality and participatory democracy” (Jacobitti 1974: 505). Levi, on the other hand, accuses the otherwise “fascinating” book of being mainly descriptive and synthetic, that is, “it provides no new information or knowledge” (Levi 1974: 165).