



## CHAPTER 13

# Political Culture

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## CHAPTER OVERVIEW

We begin this chapter by presenting some of the ideas and goals behind the concept of political culture. Then we will look at some of the problems that have arisen in applying it. We will use examples of Russia and China to illustrate the difficulty of establishing exactly how political culture influences political change. We then argue

that despite these problems, political culture remains an important field of study in political science. We conclude by suggesting an approach to political culture that takes into account the centrality of institutions in political life and the multiplicity of political cultures that may influence the political climate in any particular nation.

▲ A shop in Bodrum Old Town, Turkey, displays the Turkish flag during the run-up to the country's 2015 elections (© Grant Rooney Premium/Alamy Stock Photo).

## Civic Culture and Political Culture

As we noted in Chapter 7, all normally functioning states require legitimacy: the people must accept both the state's policy goals and the processes by which its leaders gain power and govern. In earlier chapters we emphasized the importance of the system used to select political leaders, but it is equally important that the state's policies and processes are deemed appropriate by the particular national community in question. In other words, legitimacy also depends on the "political culture" of the people concerned.

**Political culture** may be defined as "the totality of ideas and attitudes towards authority, discipline, governmental responsibilities and entitlements, and associated patterns of cultural transmission such as the education system and family life" (Robertson, 1993, p. 382). One of the seminal works in the field of political culture was Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba's *The Civic Culture*, published over 50 years ago in 1963. The authors began with the hypothesis that for a state to be stable, there must be substantial congruence between the values of the society and the behaviour of the government.

The notion that democracy rests on a broad set of social values was not new; Alexis de Tocqueville had examined it more than a century earlier in his classic *Democracy in America* (1835–40/2000), drawing attention to differences between democratic America and aristocratic France with respect to family relations and social life. Almond and Verba expanded the scope of the comparison and quantified it, using public opinion surveys to compare political attitudes in five countries: the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, and Mexico. Their fundamental objective was not just to show how attitudes differed from one country to another: they also wanted to test the hypothesis that popular attitudes toward politics and the state in established democracies differed from those in other political systems. For this purpose they assumed the United Kingdom and United States to be "mature democracies," which was true in a sense. However, at the time the UK was still an active colonial power, while the civil rights movement against the Jim Crow laws in the United States had still to produce the Civil Rights Act.

Almond and Verba were part of the behavioural movement that was gathering momentum in American political science during the 1960s and 1970s. Inspired in part by Robert Dahl's (1961) rethinking of the nature of modern democracy as **polyarchy**, this movement sought to expand the boundaries of analysis to include the impact of social forces on the institutions that until then had been the main focus of attention. A key area of study was the political culture of individual states and how it helped to determine both the types of institutions chosen and their effectiveness. In *The Civic Culture*, Almond and Verba hypothesized that **civic culture** comprised three possible collective attitudes toward politics: "parochial," "subject," and "participant." *Parochial groups* would take little interest in politics, certainly at the national level. If they were interested in politics at all, it was only in the context of issues and events directly affecting their personal interests. *Subjects* had a wider perspective. They would be interested in national politics, but only as observers. They might cast votes in elections but would not feel capable of making any greater contribution to political life: Thus they would leave it to established elites to make the decisions. Finally, *participants* would feel that they could and should contribute to national decision making, and not just by casting the occasional vote. They would feel they were entitled to ensure that their views were taken into account when decisions were made; to that end, they would join interest groups, make contact with the media, and so on.

Almond and Verba assumed that all three types of political attitude would be present in almost all societies but in differing proportions, and that those proportions would determine the degree to which a given system was democratic. They assumed that the proportion of participant attitudes would be greatest in a mature democracy, but that no democracy could be viable if everyone wanted to participate. It was essential, therefore, that a significant proportion of the population in a modern democracy accept the more passive “subject” orientation. In other words, most people would have to be deferential toward authority if the system was to be stable. As discussed above, this subject orientation would be based on such issues as race, gender, and class. There was little chance that white middle-class American males, like the two authors of this study, would be subjects of the political system.

A companion work by Lucian Pye and Verba (1965) introduced a theme that was also widely taken up later: political culture and “modernization.” Do political attitudes change with socioeconomic development? If so, what is the best way to achieve a democratic political culture? What role can new institutions play? And which sort of institutions are desirable? Pye and Verba hypothesized that questions like these could be answered by focusing on four themes or pairs of values; see Box 13.1.

These studies of political culture offered a whole new way of conceptualizing political life, one that could incorporate findings from other disciplines such as psychology. They inspired a large number of studies that applied similar approaches to other political systems, including studies by people who did not share all of the original researchers’ assumptions or objectives.

Michael Sodaro (2008, pp. 300–4) has classified the findings of this research into three categories, each of which covers a spectrum of alternatives:

1. Attitudes toward authority run from submissive at one end, through deferential and then alienated, to rebellious at the other end.
2. Attitudes toward society express themselves along two dimensions. The first runs from highly consensual to highly conflictual, with various combinations of the two in between. The second runs from extreme individualism to extreme collectivism.
3. Attitudes toward the state run from approval for a very permissive state at one end to approval for a very interventionist state at the other.

### KEY CONCEPT BOX 13.1

#### The Four Pairs of Values of the Civic Culture

1. Trust versus suspicion: To what extent do individuals in a given society trust strangers, or even people with whom they are familiar?
2. Hierarchy versus equality: How far do individuals respond to traditional social hierarchies and hierarchies of power?
3. Liberty versus coercion: How far do individuals and groups insist on their freedom to act?
4. Levels of loyalty and commitment: To what extent do individuals and groups focus their loyalty on family, parochial groupings, or on the nation as a whole?

Source: Pye & Verba (1965, pp. 22–3)

Thus the field opened up and it became common for studies of individual political systems to include political culture as a variable. Nevertheless, this is among the areas of political science where challenges have been most frequent. The original works by Almond, Pye, and Verba were theoretically more nuanced than many of their detractors later claimed, and they did not make unqualified assertions about the explanatory power of their approaches. Yet there are several reasons why using political culture to explain political outcomes is problematic. We will look at some of those problems in the next section.

### KEY POINTS

- The intellectual origins of the concept of political culture lie in efforts to identify the civic culture—that is, the particular set of attitudes—that makes democracy work.
- Enquiries have focused on attitudes toward authority, society, and the state that could be combined to identify the political culture of a particular state.

## Challenges to the Concept of Political Culture

In this section we will look at five points on which the concept of political culture has been challenged. The first four relate to operational difficulties, while the fifth involves one of the ways in which it has been used.

### 1. Identifying a Homogeneous National Political Culture

The first challenge has to do with the incorrect assumption that any nation will have a single political culture. Italy offers a useful example. In fact, there are several ways in which Italy does not fit the standard picture of Western European politics. For example, the Italian state enjoys much less respect from citizens than other European states do. Almond and Verba concluded that Italy had an “alienated political culture,” characterized by social isolation and distrust (Almond & Verba, 1965, p. 308). In some parts of Italy, especially in the south, alternative social institutions, even organized crime, may perform functions on behalf of local communities that in other countries are carried out by the state. Even before *The Civic Culture* was published, the sociologist Edward Banfield (1958) had examined this phenomenon in poorer parts of Sicily. He concluded that the lack of community spirit he saw could be explained by what he called **amoral familism**: a tendency to put the needs and interests of one’s own families above those of the rest of society. The entire focus was on the advancement of the family; the only morality worth mentioning consisted of promoting the family’s interests by any means possible. Indeed, there were few if any moral checks on the pursuit of those family interests. The result was a highly divided society where people were unwilling to contribute to the public good and where politics was dominated by the interests of particular families (Banfield, 1958).

In 1993, Robert Putnam and two Italian colleagues produced another influential work on Italian political culture. *Making Democracy Work* was a comparative study that found civic engagement to be much stronger in the north of Italy than in the south, where Putnam observed the same type of amoral familism that Banfield had identified. After surveying the historical traditions of particular regions in the north, Putnam, Leonardi, and Nanetti (1993, p. 162) concluded that

The regions characterized by civic involvement in the late twentieth century are almost precisely the same regions where cooperatives and cultural associations and mutual aid societies were most abundant in the nineteenth century, and where neighbourhood associations and religious confraternities and guilds had contributed to the flourishing communal republics of the twelfth century.

In other words, the north had **social capital**, which translated into democratic practice. Putnam's study was a striking reaffirmation of the importance of political culture in democracy. Also important was his focus on corruption. In places with high levels of public trust and professionalism, corruption was low and democratic accountability was much higher.

Putnam's study has been extremely influential, and his conclusions have been turned into hypotheses for the analysis of other states, although he has also provoked controversy (Jackman & Miller, 2004). For our purposes, however, the important point is that *Making Democracy Work* describes two very different political cultures within a single country. Almond and Verba, by contrast, tried to identify a single national political culture in Italy. Even though they did not assume complete homogeneity—they did examine the impact of different levels of education on political views, for example—they did not take into account regional variations. The Putnam study demonstrates why that is a problem.

The same point could be made about Almond and Verba's analysis of politics in the UK. Again they assumed a territorially homogeneous political culture; yet within a few years Northern Ireland was swept up in a surge of protest and violence that was to last for more than three decades. The problem of identifying a single national political culture is especially acute in religiously or ethnically divided states. The Irish "troubles" showed that Britain did not in fact have a single deferential political culture, and the more recent rise of Scottish and Welsh nationalisms is further evidence that "British" political culture is anything but homogeneous. After all, why did the Scots launch a referendum on independence in 2014 if they thought they were the same as all other British people?

Size and regional diversity also matter. The American Civil War ended almost a century and a half ago, yet political attitudes are still divided between the North and the South. Before 1861 the South had produced most of the country's presidents, but it took 115 years for the next southerner to be elected in his own right—Jimmy Carter in 1976 (Woodrow Wilson had moved to the North first, while Harry Truman and Lyndon Johnson were vice-presidents who took over the presidency after the deaths of the incumbents). David Hackett Fischer, in *Albion's Seed* (1989), argues that four main groups from different parts of Britain carried their "hearth cultures" to the American colonies in four waves: Puritans from eastern England to New England (1629–40); royalist Cavaliers from southern England to Virginia (1642–75); Quakers from the north Midlands to Pennsylvania and Delaware (1675–1715); and Scots–Irish from lowland Scotland, Northern Ireland, and northern England to the backcountry (1717–75). Each group brought with it a different idea of freedom: a moralistic "ordered freedom" for the Puritans; "hegemonic freedom" for the aristocratic Cavaliers; "reciprocal freedom" for the Quakers; and "natural freedom" for the Scots–Irish. These differing conceptions were reflected in the societies that the four groups built: thus the South was characterized by ideals of tradition and hierarchy and a tendency to seek "violent retaliation over insults" (see also Lind, 2002, pp. 122–4), while the North was associated with individualism and moralism. Such differences would become manifest during the Civil War and, as Fischer notes, they are still reflected today in regional attitudes and voting patterns.

## KEY QUOTE BOX 13.2

### The Battle over the Confederate Flag

The Confederate battle flag, a symbol of both racism and southern pride, was removed on Friday from the South Carolina state Capitol grounds after the Civil War banner fell from favor since the slaying of nine black churchgoers in June. The rebel flag, raised on state grounds more than 50 years ago at the height of the U.S. civil rights movement, was taken down just after 10 a.m. . . .

“It’s a great day in South Carolina,” the state’s Republican Governor Nikki Haley said on Friday in an interview with NBC’s *Today* show. As she signed the legislation to remove the Confederate flag on Thursday, Haley said: “We will bring it down with dignity.” Haley called for the flag’s relocation shortly after the killing of nine black worshippers during a Bible study session on June 17 at a historic black church in Charleston. “I’m thinking of those nine people today,” Haley said on *Today*.

The white man charged in the killings, 21-year-old Dylann Roof, appeared in photographs posing with a Confederate flag that surfaced on a website bearing a racist manifesto. The image spurred politicians and leading national retailers to pull the flag from display.

In South Carolina, the first state to secede during the 1861–1865 U.S. Civil War, this week’s debate in the state legislature brought an emotional closure to a symbol long divisive in the state. The Confederate flag waved atop the state capitol from 1961 to 2000, when it was moved to a Confederate war memorial near the State House entrance.

“In South Carolina we honor tradition, we honor history, we honor heritage. But there’s a place for that flag and that flag needs to be in a museum, where we will continue to make sure that people can honor it appropriately,” Haley said on *Today*. “But the state-house—that’s an area that belongs to everyone,” she added. “No one should drive by the statehouse and feel pain, no one should ever drive by the statehouse and feel like they don’t belong.” Critics now hope to remove it as quietly as possible. (Stein, 2015)

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Canada, like the United States, has its own divisions, including those based on language, ethnicity, indigeneity, as well as region. Four regional power centres (Ontario, Quebec, Alberta, and British Columbia) all have their own distinct cultures, as do smaller regions such as Atlantic Canada and the North. Under such circumstances any attempt to identify a common national political culture is problematic—as Almond and Verba later acknowledged (1989, p. 406). And this of course does not acknowledge Indigenous peoples, who were thriving before colonization, and have fared far less well afterwards. Nor does it recognize the great racial and ethnic changes that have taken place in Canada since the 1960s.

## 2. Identifying Causal Linkages between Attitudes and Political Outcomes

A second challenge in operationalizing the concept of political culture is to identify the chain of causation between the sources of the political attitudes held by a particular



**PHOTO 13.1** | The Confederate flag outside the South Carolina statehouse. The flag came down in July 2015 after an emotional debate following the mass shootings of nine black people at the historic Mother Emanuel Church in Charleston on 17 June.

group of people, or even a whole society—attitudes formed largely in youth—and political outcomes years or even decades later. How do we know which cultural attitudes and values lead to which sorts of policies or institutions? By focusing on the sources of national values, behaviouralists such as Almond, Verba, and Pye tended to imply that political outlooks were largely set by the time of adulthood, or at any rate soon afterwards. In so doing, they discounted the human potential for learning and changing in response to events. Even if a great many decisions are made in conformity with values absorbed in youth, it's clear that not all of them are: Every revolution, for example, represents a break with previous trends and traditions.

### 3. *The State May Shape Political Culture to Its Own Ends*

An underlying assumption of *The Civic Culture* was that the legitimacy of a political system depended on its fit with pre-existing social and political values. For countries with a well-defined historical national identity, such as Canada, the United States, and many Western European nations, the authors argued that the state reflected a particular set of pre-existing social values. In fact, though, most if not all states actively work to instill national values as part of the school curriculum and to socialize young people into approved political values and national identity. In so doing, a state effectively shapes the expectations by which it will be judged, and the greater its success in this effort the greater its legitimacy will be. In other words, the state actively works to shape national identity; this is especially true in settler states where governments and society sought to assimilate both Indigenous peoples and newcomers from racialized minority backgrounds. This was a possibility that theories of political culture did not really take into account.

For an example of how a state shapes history, consider China. The Chinese state has more than 5,000 years of recorded history, although it is only for the last 2,000 that the

recording has taken place roughly contemporaneously with the events being recorded. Not surprisingly, history plays an important role in Chinese political culture. Mao Zedong repeatedly drew parallels between his own actions and those of past emperors. The same holds true of later Chinese premiers, who often hark back to the actions of ancient emperors in justifying their actions. In explaining the modern rise of China and why its dominance in Asia is seen as legitimate, Ja Ian Chong (2014) identifies two key aspects of Chinese history: one based on the attractiveness of Confucian traditions and the other based on strong economic, political, and military traditions:

China's apparent legitimacy appears to originate from its presumed cultural attractiveness, political longevity and moral authority. Conventional wisdom on this matter cites admiration for China's "Confucian" philosophical tradition—which originates in the 4th century BCE—across Asia as a key reason for the acceptance of leadership by its ruling houses. Central to this customary system is an emphasis on benevolent rule centred on wisdom and meritocratic governance. This set the tone for concordant relations between China and its neighbours, and even the adoption of Chinese writing, administrative frameworks and academic systems from Japan to Korea, Vietnam and parts of Inner Asia. . . . The allure of Chinese traditions is such that it even assimilated non-Han rulers of China such as the Gokturks, Khitans, Mongols, Jurchens and Manchus.

Alongside beliefs in the moral and cultural underpinnings of Chinese leadership lies a view that sees Chinese dynasties as enjoying undisputed political, military and economic preponderance. This position contrasts the geographical and population size of various Chinese dynasties to neighbouring polities, which could be several-fold. Chinese regimes had militaries that significantly outnumbered their neighbours and at times controlled sizeable naval fleets . . . Economic historians estimate that China was the world's largest economy for much of the period between the 1st and early 19th centuries. (Chong, 2014, p. 951)

Russia is another example of the same phenomenon. Across the Eurasian landmass there are few geographical features to serve as natural boundaries. The whole area has been subject to periodic invasion from east and west. Thus Russians identify their territory with the state that established secure borders, and a concern with "state-ness" (*gosudarstvennost*), or the ability of the state to operate effectively, is an enduring feature of Russian political culture. Russian leaders have traditionally played on this concern, reminding the people that a strong, effective state is a precondition for "normal" social life. Russian attitudes toward democracy are coloured accordingly—even today, many Russians believe it's more important for the country to be strong than to be democratic.

The state's role in the creation of the nation's political culture is even more important in states with a short history of independence, notably the former colonies in Africa and Asia. In many cases the borders of these states were drawn by the colonial regimes and did not take into account the connections and divisions between communities, clans, tribes, and so on. Thus, as we argued in Chapter 7, postcolonial states often had to create a nation by selecting the cultural attributes, languages, and religions they would promote



and establishing both a national identity and national values. Some have been more successful at this task than others.

According to the 2005 World Values Survey, 54 per cent of Tanzanians described their political system as “very good”; this score was the highest for any African state and meant that the Tanzanian system had the greatest legitimacy. Although Tanzania’s founding president, Julius Nyerere, was committed to a socialist economic program that proved to be unsustainable, politically he succeeded in establishing national unity through the creation of a one-party state. He was able to do so because colonial rule had undermined traditional political structures and suppressed attempts at “native rebellion.” Thus the Tanzanian African National Union imposed itself as the sole political force after independence, and it has preserved its dominance as the revolutionary party despite the introduction of multiparty elections in 1995 (Baregu, 1997). It has avoided exploiting tribal divisions and has achieved diffuse but broad popular support. There is widespread participation in political rallies and campaigns, but little individual political activism, despite intense dissatisfaction with poor economic development and corruption. All in all, it would seem that the dominant orientation is what Almond and Verba would call “subjects.” Political change has been top-down but fairly flexible (Martin, 1988). In short, Tanzania has been relatively effective in establishing political values and support for them, and in this respect, according to Afrobarometer (an African-led series of national public surveys), it stands out among African states (Chaligha, Mattes, Bratton, & Davids, 2002).

By contrast, only 8 per cent of Pakistani respondents to the World Values Survey regarded their political system as very good—the lowest figure for any state in Asia or sub-Saharan Africa. This is not surprising, given the shocks that Pakistan has endured since its creation as an independent state in 1947. First, the partition of India was carried out on very short notice, with the result that the boundaries were not well thought out and the people did not have time to prepare. More than 10 million Muslim refugees were forced to flee from India, while millions of Hindus were similarly uprooted from Pakistan. Furthermore, Pakistan was divided into two parts on either side of India, with quite different historical traditions and attitudes about the place of religion in public life (Humayun, 1995).

West Pakistan maintained control over East Pakistan until 1971, when the latter seceded to form the new country of Bangladesh. The Pakistani regime was forced to re-create the country’s national identity after losing half of its population and territory. Meanwhile, the task of maintaining popular support in a military-dominated regime was exacerbated by two wars that Pakistan initiated with India, in 1965 and 1971, both of which it lost. Today significant numbers of Pakistanis reject state attempts to impose laws that they believe to be inconsistent with Islam—a major problem for a state whose Islamic identity is fundamental (Yilmaz, 2005, pp. 126–7). In addition the state has had to deal with alternating military rule and attempts at democracy, a great deal of corruption, and widespread tendencies toward the kind of “amoral familism” that Banfield identified in southern Italy. Under those circumstances it is not surprising that the Pakistani regime has found it difficult to establish a durable political culture.

#### **4. The Impact of Globalization**

**Globalization** makes it all the more challenging to clearly identify a national political culture. Borders separating inside from outside become more porous. At the elite level,

ambitious politicians eagerly search for new ideas to win elections, manipulate the media, and mould public support. At the popular level, increasing cross-border migration by workers means that appeals for political support can no longer rely on traditional themes and approaches. We can see this clearly in the strenuous efforts that American parties now put into winning the Hispanic vote.

### **5. Political Culture Is Used to Explain Why Change Cannot Happen**

Finally, the notion of national political cultures is often used to justify failures in developing democracy, or even to argue that democracy is inappropriate for certain states. Such arguments usually begin with the assertion that democracy is a Western concept, implying that states in other parts of the world have different cultural traditions. This was the argument used in Singapore to explain why the regime had been so slow to move toward more open democracy, although its standard of living has matched or even exceeded that of many European countries. “Asians” were said to value order and stability more highly than freedom (Emmerson, 1995), and for this reason confrontational party democracy was inappropriate and undesirable for them. Famously, former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew argued that “Asian values” are very different from those of the West. His remarks and the responses they provoked led to some interesting debates about the role of culture in human rights and democracy. As Fareed Zakaria (2002) has observed, “Many Asian dictators used arguments about their region’s unique culture to stop Western politicians from pushing them to democratize. The standard rebuttal was that Asians prefer order to the messy chaos of democracy.”

There may be some truth to the claim that “Asians” value order and stability more highly than freedom, but the supposed incompatibility of democracy with non-Western political traditions is often exaggerated by elites seeking to maintain the status quo, especially when it favours them. Until the late 1980s, it was regularly assumed that Confucianism was incompatible with democracy because it advocated obedience to authority, whether the head of the household or the head of the state. There was no requirement for consultation with other family members or members of society, let alone any right to joint decision making. Until the 1980s the evidence from East Asia supported this assumption: No Confucian society practised democracy.

In 1987–8, however, two states still heavily influenced by Confucianism—Taiwan and South Korea—went democratic, and they have not looked back. Even though their democratic regimes still have problems, such as corruption, no attempts have been made to overthrow them. So now Confucianism is increasingly seen as compatible with democracy (Fukuyama, 1995). And in 1999–2001, in a World Values Survey in which an overall average of 91 per cent of respondents in 80 countries answered that democracy was a “very good” or “fairly good” way of running a country, only one of the main “Confucian” states (South Korea) returned a score lower than that of the United States—which at 89 per cent was below the average. All the others (China, Singapore, Taiwan) ranked higher than the United States (Inglehart, Basañez, Diéz-Medrano, Halman, & Luijckx, 2004, p. E117). Of course, we should not assume that all the respondents understood the term *democracy* in the same way. Nevertheless, these findings certainly do not suggest that Confucian states have a culturally based hostility to the principle of democracy.

### KEY POINTS

- There are several fundamental objections to the concept of political culture: It assumes homogeneous national values, it remains extremely difficult to operationalize, and it is difficult to link values and political outcomes, especially at the systemic level.
- The fact that many states educate their populations in political values makes it difficult to analyze the effect of those values on policies and institutions.
- Globalization multiplies the factors affecting political values.
- Political culture is commonly used to justify failure to move toward democracy.

### *The Significance of Political Culture: A Case Study*

To illustrate the difficulty of relying on political culture to explain political outcomes, consider the Case Study of post-Soviet Russia in Box 13.3.

### CASE STUDY 13.3

#### Political Culture and the Collapse of Soviet Communism

Certainly, Russia has enjoyed less success than most states in Eastern and Central Europe in managing the transition to democracy. There was much optimism at first. The collapse of the Soviet Union was surprisingly peaceful, given the size of the KGB and armed forces; only three people died in the aftermath of the short-lived attempt to depose Mikhail Gorbachev in August 1991. This led to euphoria about the possibilities for a smooth and relatively painless political transition. Yet by the time the World Values Survey was carried out in Russia in 2000, only 3 per cent of respondents rated the current political system as “good” or “very good”—the lowest figure for any country in the world (Inglehart et al., 2004, p. E111A). What accounts for this disillusionment? To what extent can Russia’s political culture be blamed?

In favour of the political culture argument is the fact that Russia had never had a fully functioning democracy. Seventy-four years of communist rule had been preceded by a dozen years of limited parliamentary democracy under the last Czar and, before that, centuries of autocracy during which millions of people had been regarded as the property of their aristocratic landlords; in some cases the lives of serfs were little better than those of slaves. Although there was no national democratic tradition on which reformers could draw, Russia did have a tradition of collectivism stretching back long before the advent of communism. As various foreign commentators have noted, this tradition stood in strong contrast to Western individualism.

It is also true that the collapse of the Soviet Union took the new leaders, including President Boris Yeltsin, almost by surprise. They had no plans for a democratic transition and had to improvise as they went along. Few newly created political parties turned into viable national institutions. The strongest remained the Russian Communist Party, which retained significant amounts of its Soviet-era assets and support. Most of the politicians and new parties were active only

*Continued*

in Moscow. The lack of a democratic political culture of give-and-take was exemplified by the events of 1993, when the parliament defied the president and in the end the army was authorized to intervene and shell the parliament building. President Yeltsin himself was not preoccupied with establishing robust political institutions—apart from the presidency. He was suspicious of potential rivals and often went out of his way to undermine them.

On the other hand, many other things also went wrong during the transition. The program of economic reforms initially led to a dramatic fall in economic output—greater than the fall that Canada and the United States experienced during the Great Depression of the 1930s. Massive inflation in 1992–3 wiped out the savings of millions of people. Then, just as the economy was beginning to recover, another financial crisis wiped out savings in 1998. Russia was also hit by a mounting security crisis after the mid-1990s, centred on Chechnya and other breakaway republics seeking independence. Many people felt that, without the former republics, the very survival of Russia was in doubt. While there was significant financial help available through institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, the EU did not try to encourage reform by offering Russia the carrot of possible EU membership, as it did for Eastern and Central Europe.

Under those circumstances, it is easy to understand why Russia had difficulty making the transition to democracy. Clearly, political values played a part in terms of the persisting effects of earlier political socialization, as well as the lack of preparation for the post-communist era. We could also argue that the financial crashes and internal terrorism both had the effect of undermining the regime's legitimacy. Earlier political traditions might have contributed to the weakness of the legislature, but even here it would be wrong to attribute great significance to culture. The problem is compounded on the level of individual political leaders. Yeltsin was a product of the communist system and its ideological indoctrination; his authoritarian tendencies made it difficult for him to conceptualize a post-communist regime. Yet he, more than any other political figure, brought down communism in the USSR. Though he was a product of communist political culture, even in late middle age he moved decisively against it.

After the departure of Yeltsin, however, things changed dramatically under Vladimir Putin, who has served as president, prime minister, and then president again. Russia is no longer classified as a democracy, and Putin seems to epitomize the old strong-man type of Russian and Soviet leader. Polling in 2015 showed a strong disconnect between Russian views of Putin and the government, police, courts, and bureaucracies. Putin has enjoyed tremendous personal popularity, which only increased when he took on a harder military line over areas such as Ukraine and the Crimea. While in 2012 and 2013 Putin's approval ratings were in the 60s, they surged in 2014 when he launched a military intervention in Ukraine and hit 89 per cent in June 2015.

Nardelli, Rankin, and Arnett (2015) observe "Some 70% of Russians believe the country should stick to its current position on Ukraine, while 20% say it would be better to make concessions in order to avoid sanctions. 87% support the annexation of Crimea, and only 4% think that the eastern regions of Donetsk and Luhansk should return to their pre-conflict status." Now what about Russian views of the state? Polls in 2015 showed that "58% of Russians say that government officials primarily seek to preserve and strengthen their own power and 60% say that government officials are not accountable to society. Russians are not over eager to spend quality time with government employees, with 69% of them trying to have minimal interaction with the government. Nor do Russians possess strong faith in the legal system, with 47% claiming not to feel protected by the law while only 41% saying they did" (Simes, 2015). On the economy only 15 per cent of Russians feel things are "good," a sharp contrast to the 31 per cent who see it as "either bad or very poor" (Nardelli et al., 2015).

## The Persisting Significance of Political Culture

Despite all the problems of operationalizing the concept, it would be wrong to reject political culture entirely. There are a number of points to make in its favour:

1. Citizens of different states do have different attitudes toward similar institutions and issues. As we noted in Chapter 7, residents of North America and the Islamic world not only have different perspectives on their states, they also live in very different kinds of states.

Even attitudes toward politics in general vary considerably from one state to another. According to the World Values Survey conducted in 1999–2002, only 45 per cent of roughly 2,000 respondents across all countries reported that they were “very” or “somewhat” interested in politics, but the figures for individual countries showed wide variation (Inglehart et al., p. E023.).

2. Political actors believe that there are differences in political culture. President Charles De Gaulle of France more than once remarked, only partly in jest, that it was extremely difficult to govern a country so individualistic that it had 246 varieties of cheese (and now there are over 400). Here are four more examples:
  - a) The first relates to American foreign policymaking in the 1990s. The Yugoslav civil war was marked by widespread brutality against civilians and many massacres. Western states debated whether to intervene, but although the UN did agree to send peacekeepers, the United States for a long time refused to get involved. There were many reasons for this—the legacy of the Vietnam experience, the feeling that European states should take the lead—but another was reportedly that President Clinton had read journalist Robert Kaplan’s book *Balkan Ghosts* (2005) to gain background information on the region. Kaplan’s depiction of the Balkans as a region of ancient hatreds and blood feuds made Clinton reluctant to risk American troops there.
  - b) The second example concerns Samuel Huntington’s widely cited 1996 book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. A well-known political scientist at Harvard University, Huntington argued that with the end of the Cold War the major sources of international conflict would be the differences between the major world civilizations—principally Western Christianity and Islam. Clashes would arise because of conflicting values and the desire on the part of each to increase its sway in the world—the West to spread democracy and the Muslim world to resist it. In Huntington’s view, the fault was primarily attributable to the political culture of Islam. “Muslims,” he argued, “have problems living peaceably with their neighbors” and were thus responsible for the majority of inter- and intracivilization conflicts in modern history. Based on a “casual survey of intercivilizational conflicts,” he declared that “Islam’s borders are bloody, and so are its innards” (Huntington, 1996, pp. 256–8). Even though it was not based on any survey research and its conclusions have been challenged by numerous commentators, including Inglehart and Norris (2003) on the basis of World Values Survey findings, Huntington’s thesis attracted a great deal of attention, and it gained additional legitimacy after the terrorist attacks

of September 2001 as an explanation for the apparent “anti-Americanism” of so many people in Islamic countries (MacDonald, 2009, p. 101).

- c) The third example comes from India. Since independence India has prided itself on being a secular state that treats believers from all religious backgrounds equally. This was a principle laid down by the Congress Party, which ruled India from independence in 1947 until 1989. In more recent years, however, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has asserted an alternative principle of *Hindutva* (“Hindu-ness”), which would give political recognition to the dominant position in Indian society occupied by Hindus. This is based on a quite different conception of Indian political identity and would transform Indian political life (Malik & Singh, 1995). The BJP under Prime Minister Modi gained power nationally in 2014. Policy-wise, the BJP appeared to have backtracked on some of its earlier *Hindutva* messaging. Its website promotes policies that on the surface seem designed to promote economic growth while respecting diversity. The “Vision of Modi” is described as follows: “The concept of Brand India encapsulates all the sectors that have the potential to make India a global power. The five-Ts of Brand India are talent, trade, tradition, tourism and technology. The concept of Rainbow of India envisions seven key focus areas which will be the overarching theme of all initiatives to make India a developed nation. These themes are India’s culture, agriculture, women, natural resources, youth power, democracy and knowledge” (BJP, 2015). Pande (2015) observes that Modi has tried to keep Hindu nationalism at arm’s length and has reprimanded ministers who are too pro-Hindu and not inclusive enough. Indeed Modi recently spoke out against “communal tensions” and has sought to remove the “poison of casteism, communalism, regionalism, and discrimination on social and economic bases.”
- d) The fourth example concerns the European Union. Gradually the EU has expanded from 6 to 28 member countries and further expansion is still possible, in particular for Turkey, Serbia, Bosnia, and Albania. Farther east, countries such as Russia and Ukraine may also apply at some point in the future although Russia is unlikely to apply or to be accepted. All candidate countries must comply with the so-called Copenhagen criteria laid down in 1993; see Box 13.4. Clearly with the British vote to exit the EU the project of European institutional expansion is now imperilled, and is shrinking rather than expanding. It’s not clear how the EU will navigate this difficult period of transition.

### KEY CONCEPT BOX 13.4

#### The EU’s Copenhagen Criteria for New Members

A candidate country must have achieved:

- stable institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and respect for and protection of minority rights;
- a functioning market economy as well as the capacity to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the Union;
- the ability to take on the obligations of membership including adherence to the aims of political, economic, and monetary union.

With respect to Turkey, the former French President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing added a further set of conditions relating to what he called "the foundations" of European identity: things such as "the cultural contributions of ancient Greece and Rome, the religious heritage pervading European life, the creative enthusiasm of the Renaissance, the philosophy of the Enlightenment and the contributions of rational and scientific thought" (Giscard d'Estaing, 2004). Earlier, he had highlighted as problems Turkey's geographical location (mostly in Asia) as well as the size of its population and its potential impact on future European decision making. He did emphasize that Turkey has its own distinguished history and culture and that its Muslim society was not a problem, but he implied that Turkey had not shared Western European history and that this presented a serious obstacle. Whether this judgment was really intended to rationalize objections based on racism or xenophobia is difficult to tell. In any event, debates about what it means to be European will become more pronounced as the borders of the EU continue to expand eastwards.

3. Political culture can be extremely important when we look at the imposition of democracy in other countries. The experience of the Confucian world shows that democracy can take root even when preconditions favouring it are absent. And the successful establishment of democracy in Germany and Japan after World War II shows that it can be transplanted. Even so, the more recent experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan show that foreign models of democracy cannot simply be grafted onto indigenous social structures. Unless occupying forces are prepared to impose their will and suppress resistance for as long as it takes to change hearts and minds, they must take local attitudes into account. This is unavoidable.
4. Political culture may indeed help to explain different policy outcomes. Attitudes toward the welfare state differ considerably between Europeans and Americans. Alesina and Glaeser (2004) suggest that Americans tend to have different attitudes from Europeans toward income inequality and income redistribution. Based on several rounds of the World Values Survey, they estimated that some 60 per cent of Americans believe that the poor are lazy, as compared to 26 per cent of people in the EU. On the other hand, 60 per cent of those in the EU believe that the poor are trapped in poverty, while only 29 per cent in the United States believe this.

Curiously, it was not always the case that Europeans believed in state redistribution to help the poor. In the nineteenth century there was no welfare state on either side of the Atlantic. Alesina and Glaeser conclude that Europeans' ideas about the poor were shaped by political institutions. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, European labour and socialist parties promoted the view that the poor were trapped and deserving of government help. The success of those parties helped spread the ideas behind the welfare state so that even their opponents accepted the validity of the concept and sought only to limit the size of the state based on it. Welfare came to be seen as a right, an entitlement of every citizen who needed it, however much it cost.

In the United States, by contrast, organized labour never achieved the same political success during industrialization. One reason was the enduring power of the founding myth of the United States as a land of opportunity for all. Another was the fact that the vast geographical size of the country made it difficult for

scattered workers to take concerted political action. At the same time, for many middle-class Americans the real poor were black, who in their view made no effort to overcome their situation. The US Constitution also played a role to the extent that it enshrined the property rights of recent colonizers and was not subject to strong challenges from social groups with different attitudes and interests. Hence welfare issues were always presented in terms of costs and benefits for the whole of society, with the emphasis on the costs (Alesina & Glaeser, 2004).

Alesina and Glaeser highlight the value of political culture as an explanatory tool that can help shed light on the factors behind different political outcomes. However, instead of relying on political culture as their only explanation (as we did in our Case Study of Russia, above) they treat it as one factor among several that together can offer a more complete explanation of policy outcomes. They also suggest that the political culture in question was itself an amalgam of original values and more recent ones, and that it was in part created by political institutions. The result is a much more dynamic understanding of the way political culture both evolves and affects policy.

5. A nation's political culture is part of the national identity, without which nationalism could not exist, so ways of analyzing it have paralleled those applied to the study of nationalism. Primordialist and perennialist theorists of nationalism stress the enduring elements of a nation's political culture. They argue that the nation predates the Industrial Revolution, and they take religious and other forms of group identity into account in tracing the origins of a particular nation (Greenfeld, 1992). Newer theoretical approaches to nationalism, such as ethno-symbolism, seek to identify core symbols of a nation's identity that can be used to bolster national pride. The most potent symbols have a long history. They may be subject to various interpretations by different groups over time, but this is less important than the fact that they always reinforce identity, even when their connotations are negative (Leoussi & Grosby, 2006).

Aronoff (2001) suggests that students of political culture are now taking a similar approach: Instead of searching for some permanent core of a nation's political culture, they are focusing on common symbols of that culture (Aronoff, 2001, pp. 11, 640). Even if those symbols give rise to radically different evaluations, positive or negative, they still serve to reinforce the sense of national identity. The potential range of symbols with special significance for members of a given nation is enormous and may include not only people (individuals and groups), events, and achievements, but even failures.

Because of the radical changes in domestic policies that followed the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, the People's Republic of China has changed its official assessments of many elements of Chinese political culture. Let us give two examples, first of a famous individual, and then of a symbol of national achievement. The individual is Confucius. While Mao was ruling China, he wanted to radicalize popular ways of thinking, so he used Confucius as a symbol of the old "feudal" ways, especially during the Cultural Revolution. Major campaigns were waged against Confucius and "Confucianists." Yet since Mao's death Confucius has regained official approval as a symbol of the greatness of Chinese civilization. And in 2004 the state established the first in what are now more than a hundred government-run



Confucius Institutes outside China, designed to spread knowledge of Chinese culture, language, and civilization around the world.

A key symbol today for the greatness of Chinese national achievement is the Great Wall. Again, in Mao's time the Great Wall was treated as a symbol of China's "feudal" past—in particular, of the sufferings imposed on the subservient masses by a cruel imperial system—and used to inspire popular support for socialism. Since Mao's death, however, the Great Wall has become a symbol of China's past greatness. (It was even alleged, though wrongly, that the Wall is the only human-made structure that can be seen from space.) Today the Wall is presented as a symbol of the future achievements of the Chinese people (Waldron, 1993).

Most nations have historical achievements that they point to as sources of national pride. The civilizations of ancient Greece and Rome, the French Revolution, and the British Empire are just a few examples. Even if some of these achievements are subject to radically different interpretations, positive and negative, they still serve to highlight enduring features of a particular political culture. As we noted in Chapter 11, Simon Bolívar was until recently a unifying symbol for Venezuela, and former President Chávez and current President Maduro both use Bolívar as inspiration for standing up to the forces of globalization, especially the United States.

Social values can also become symbols of national identity and pride. The British sense of "fair play," Americans' "can-do" attitude, Canadian "politeness," and the "broad," generous nature of Russians (as opposed to the supposedly narrow, mean attitude of Western Europeans) have all served this purpose. In Britain, interviews carried out for the Commission for Racial Equality identified a number of values, attitudes, and behaviours associated with "Britishness," ranging from the rule of law, fairness, tolerance, mutual help, stoicism, and compassion to drunkenness and hooliganism. Interestingly, some characteristics that white English interviewees treated as positive (for example, pride) were seen as negative by those of Scots, Welsh, and immigrant backgrounds (Commission for Racial Equality, 2005, pp. 25–9).

Symbols of failure are less often called on to represent national identity, but Serbia provides one example. In 1389 the young Serbian empire was destroyed by Ottoman Turkish forces at Kosovo Polje. What followed was 500 years of Ottoman domination. Exemplifying Serbian heroism and refusal to surrender even in the face of overwhelming odds, the battle of Kosovo Polje has been cited by Serbs in military and political struggles throughout the centuries. It also came to be seen as a sacrifice that Serbs made for the sake of "Europe," since their ongoing resistance to Turkish rule helped to prevent the Ottomans from pressing farther west; thus it is also used to assert Serbs' European-ness, even though most of the EU has sanctioned Kosovo's independence. Similarly, Quebec nationalism is based in part on symbols of defeat, such as the battle of the Plains of Abraham and Quebec's exclusion from the 1982 Constitution, sometimes recalled as the "night of the long knives" (Mock, 2011, p. 4).

These examples illustrate an important point: Political culture is not a national consensus on the appropriate goals and processes of politics, but a set of narratives and symbols of national identity that different groups try to manipulate for their own political advantage.

### KEY POINTS

- Obvious differences in political attitudes between citizens of different states are reflected in significantly different policy outcomes. This is one reason it is so difficult to transplant democracy from one state to another.
- Political actors accept this reality, and governments sometimes base policies on it.
- Political culture is closely linked to nationalism.

## Conclusion

In this chapter we have argued that even though the concept of political culture is open to challenge, it will continue to inform political analysis both within states and between them. Political culture is important for several reasons. First, it can help clarify genuinely different attitudes toward politics between peoples in different parts of the world; for a political science that seeks to be genuinely international, this is crucial. Second, politicians and decision makers do sometimes base their policies on their perceptions of different political values in various states. Third, because it involves notions of national identity, any analysis of nationalism must take political culture into account. Fourth, it has a broader disciplinary relevance.

In Chapter 7 we emphasized the crucial importance of institutions in the study of politics. Any plausible theory of political culture must recognize that the institutions it shapes play a role not only in spreading political values but also in shaping them. In other words, arguments based on political culture should reflect the fact that influence is a two-way street. And instead of searching for an unrealistic national consensus on values, political scientists should explore the multiple political *cultures* of a nation.

Finally, political culture can be linked to constructivism in international relations theory, which we will discuss in Chapter 16. Constructivism focuses on national identity. It assumes that the identity of nations determines the pattern of interactions between them; but this interaction is complicated to pin down, because it involves not only the evolving identity of a particular state but also how that state is perceived by other states.

## Key Questions

1. Why is socialized healthcare so central to national identity and public policy in Canada, yet so controversial in the United States?
2. Identify some basic symbols associated with the political culture of one or more states with which you are familiar. Have various groups attempted to manipulate those symbols to achieve political success? How?
3. How much weight would you put on political cultural factors in explaining the failures of democracy in Russia?
4. What are the European values of the EU? Do Russia and Turkey share enough of those values to allow them to join the union?
5. How effective are state educational systems in instilling national political values?

6. Is success in this effort a function of economic development? Are states in the developing world as successful as those in the developed one?
7. How far does religion structure national political culture?
8. Does globalization erode a nation's political culture or help to shape it?
9. How objectively can any of us analyze the political culture of our own country?

## Further Reading

**Adams, M. (2009).** *Fire and ice: The United States, Canada, and the myth of converging values*. Toronto: Penguin. Using a wealth of statistics and polling data, Adams critically examines important differences in political culture between Canada and the United States and argues that these differences help to explain various social attitudes and public policies.

**Diamond, L., Plattner, M.F., Chu Y. (Eds.). (2013).** *Democracy in East Asia: A new century*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. An excellent collection of essays on democracy in East Asia.

**Halman, L., Luijckx, R., & van Zundert, M. (Eds.). (2005).** *Atlas of European values*. Leiden: Tilburg University. An examination of European identity along various attitudinal dimensions, with variations by country.

**McFaul, M., & Riabov, A. (2010).** *Between dictatorship and democracy: Russian post-communist political reform*. Washington: Carnegie Endowment. A readable analysis of the reasons why democracy has not taken firm root in Russia as well as the history of dictatorship.

**Politkovskaya, A. (2012).** *Putin's Russia*. New York: Random House. An overview of Putin's rise to power and some of his strategies for staying there.

**Price, L. (2015).** *The Modi effect: Inside Narendra Modi's campaign to transform India*. London: Hachette Quercus. A British journalist's account of the meteoric rise of Modi on the domestic and world stage as well as discussion of some of his values and policies.

**Putnam, R. (2001).** *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. New York: Simon & Schuster. An influential study of social capital and its significance for democracy.

**Tan, S. (2012).** *Confucian democracy: A Deweyan reconstruction*. Albany: State University of New York Press. The author explores Confucianism as an alternative to Western forms of democracy.

## Web Links

<https://uwaterloo.ca/canadian-index-wellbeing>

Canadian Index of Wellbeing at the University of Waterloo.

[www.pollingreport.com](http://www.pollingreport.com)

Comprehensive information on current public opinion polls in the United States.

<http://confuciusinstitute.unl.edu/institutes.shtml>

Links to the network of Confucius institutes around the world. The institute spreads Chinese language, culture, and values.

[www.worldvaluessurvey.org](http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org)

The website of the World Values Survey at the University of Michigan.