

## 26 Social Foundations and Arrangements

### Democracy and Political Culture

While there is no universally agreed definition of the term, it might be said that “political culture” refers on the one hand to political institutions and processes of a society, and on the other to the attitudes, values, and certain other aspects of individual citizens respecting their relationship to political activity and the political order.

The political culture that is most agreeable to and supportive of democracy is often called “the civic culture.” The “civic culture” in this sense is conceived as an *ideal* that is never fully attained by a democracy but can be used to measure the relative health of the political culture in a particular democracy. What historical roots of the idea of political culture shed light on the political culture of democracy? What characteristics of “civic culture” can sustain modern liberal democracy?

**Roots of the idea of political culture in ancient Greece** Philosophers in ancient Greece reflected upon what today we call “political culture” and its relations to forms of government.

- **Plato** In the fifth century B.C., Plato advanced the idea that forms of government are related to the psychological characteristics of those who operate and live under those governmental forms. In his view, each form of government has a corresponding mind-set and set of individual characteristics. For example:
  - ▶ People who live under democracy are governed by their undisciplined and wide-ranging desires, which clamor for fulfillment.
  - ▶ Unlimited fulfillment of desires democrats call “freedom”; the lack of hierarchy among desires and among people democrats call “equality.” The result is a political culture afflicted by a variety of chaos.
- **Aristotle** In the fourth century B.C., Plato’s student philosopher Aristotle formulated a classic conception of political culture still influential today. He argued that the best and most stable form of government is one based on a middle class, which is neither rich nor poor.
  - ▶ By definition, the middle class has a moderate amount of wealth, and those with moderate wealth are most likely to obey reason and exhibit moderation in the pursuit of their passions. Moderate government is most likely to be stable government.
  - ▶ In describing how the mentality and habits of those who influence how stable or unstable a state may be, Aristotle is describing its *political culture*. His description of the social basis of stable government contains roots of today’s concept of the “civic culture” of democracy.
- **Roman writers and republican ideals** In the second and first centuries B.C., certain Roman writers, such as Cato the Censor and Cicero, commented on the effects that the habits of mind and behavior of citizens had on the government of the Roman state.
  - ▶ These thinkers were highly critical of signs that the habits and character of the citizenry were degenerating. They believed that *love of wealth and the luxury* it brings would weaken and threaten the stability of the Roman Republic.

- ▶ Thus they believed that the values and mores of citizens as they affected politics—Rome’s *political culture*—were a key element in understanding the political order, its problems and prospects.
  - ▶ The Roman idea that citizens ought to be concerned with public affairs and the well-being of their polity (their “country”) rather than fixed primarily on their personal pleasures is an element of the idea of “civic culture.” A civic culture or civically oriented culture may be conceived as a political culture in which concern for the public good is uppermost among citizens.
- **James Madison and the American Founders** In modern times, the Founders of the American republic read ancient writers such as Aristotle and writers of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment such as Machiavelli and Montesquieu who were concerned with political culture. The American founders argued that the values and habits of citizens as well as the size and social makeup of society were crucial for the success of the new American state.
    - ▶ Many American Founders argued that it is essential to stable, successful civic life that citizens practice the ancient republics’ virtues, summarized as the *civic virtue*. “Civic virtue” meant caring primarily for the public good as opposed to private interest.
    - ▶ James Madison argued, however, that citizens’ civic virtue, though important, should not be depended upon too heavily. Instead, the size and social make up of the new extended commercial republic was a key feature of the United States. Suitable values and habits of the People, however, would also play a significant role in maintaining limited government, as set forth in the U.S. Constitution.
  - **De Tocqueville on the political culture of America** The French aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville based much of his seminal *Democracy in America* (1838–40) on what he learned in visiting the United States in the 1830s.
    - ▶ Tocqueville formulated a classic conception of the role of political culture in American democracy: “The manners of the people,” he wrote, “may be considered as one of the great general causes to which the maintenance of a democratic republic in the United States is attributable.”
    - ▶ Perhaps the most significant of Tocqueville’s findings on political culture was the strong characteristic of Americans to *form voluntary associations* for any number of purposes, rather than depending on government to achieve their purposes. These associations, known today as “civil society,” lessen the dangers inherent in a society where all are equal, and the pervasive influence of public opinion may overpower the individual and is therefore potentially tyrannical.
  - **Contemporary criteria for civic culture** Scholars often site the following criteria as indicators that a nation’s political culture approaches the type of “civic culture” traditionally conceived as the ideal or the optimal political culture for democracy. Students of the subject do not, however, agree on the role or optimal extent of all of these characteristics.

- ▶ **Participation** Citizens are inclined to participate in the political system. There is controversy, however, over what degree of participation is best for democracy. Some scholars argue that intense, widespread political participation, especially when marked by passion, is a sign of political illness.
- ▶ **Exposure to politics** Whether or not they are frequent participants, citizens are exposed to political issues and are aware of current affairs.
- ▶ **A sense of civic competence** A sense among citizens that they can be effective in the public arena if they choose to participate is widespread.
- ▶ **Norms of moderation and toleration** Rules conducive to political stability are observed by participants at all levels of the political system. Such rules ("norms") include a sense of moderation, toleration, and civility in political activity of all kinds as well as a sense of fair play, basic honesty, the necessity to compromise and similar standards. Expressions of political hatred, baseless accusations, and contempt for political opponents are absent.
- ▶ **Involvement in public policy** Citizens exhibit a sense of interest and emotional involvement in public affairs, both at election times and between elections.
- ▶ **Attachment/loyalty to the political system** Citizens take pride in the peaceful, fair, and effective character of their democratic political system; most have an underlying satisfaction with the way society is governed.
- ▶ **Democratic self control** Opposition to government by legislators is limited and the public at large allows those in power to get on with their job.
- ▶ **Social trust** Citizens display a capacity to trust others in cooperative social action. Such trust is necessary to build civic associations that maintain a stable and healthy democratic social order. Social trust helps maintain a sense that civic action is effective and therefore worthy of effort.

### What do you think?

- 1 What are the some of the principal characteristics of your political culture?
- 2 How do you rate the political culture of your community, region, and nation? What are some signs of its health and what are some signs of problems?
- 3 How is the political culture of your community similar to or different from what is called the "civic culture"? What might people like you do to more closely resemble the "civic culture"?
- 4 What light can the history of some of the ideas about political culture, including the historical political culture of the United States, shed on your own political culture?
- 5 To what extent does your political culture meet contemporary criteria for democratic political culture outlined above?