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A Cause in Search of Its Effect, or What Does Political Culture Explain?

David J. Elkins and Richard E.B. Simeon

Political culture is one of the most popular and seductive concepts in political science; it is also one of the most controversial and confused. The reaction against the concept stems primarily from exaggerated claims made on its behalf. Neither the view which ascribes the operation of a political system to its political culture nor the view that the political culture is irrelevant merits a lengthy discussion. Instead, we offer two separate contributions in this article. We propose a definition of political culture which we believe overcomes certain deficiencies charged to previous definitions. We also outline the logical status of political culture as a component in the explanation of political phenomena. While we prefer to use our definition of the concept in conjunction with our strategy of explanation, the latter stands on its own. Regardless of how the concept of political culture has been defined, there are limits to its explanatory usefulness; clarifying these limits specifies the remaining areas in which the concept should prove valuable. This task requires that we avoid two common failings in political analysis. First, there is the failure to specify clearly and precisely the dependent variable. What is to be explained—by political culture or, indeed, by any other factor? Second, there is the need to avoid the common but disconcerting tendency to shift dependent variables in mid-analysis.

Political Culture: An Overview

Political culture consists of assumptions about the political world.¹ If a person acts on the assumptions which are widely shared in his collectivity, he will “pass” as a legitimate political actor.² An “outsider” who holds quite differ-
ent views on the nature of the political game, on proper modes of conduct, and on goals and strategies will be identifiable as deviant; he will not "pass."

Assumptions about the political world focus attention on certain features of events, institutions, and behavior, define the realm of the possible, identify the problems deemed pertinent, and set the range of alternatives among which members of the population make decisions. Political culture, then, is a shorthand expression for a "mind set" which has the effect of limiting attention to less than the full range of alternative behaviors, problems, and solutions which are logically possible. Since it represents a "disposition" in favor of a range of alternatives, by corollary another range of alternatives receives little or no attention within a particular culture. Most people in any culture, therefore, will take for granted a particular course of action or consider only a few alternatives. That they choose from a restricted set will, for most of them, remain below the threshold of consciousness, because they seldom encounter individuals who take for granted quite different assumptions.

The range of assumptions or unconscious premises coexisting within a culture may be extremely narrow, highly consistent, and strongly interrelated—as might characterize a traditional, relatively isolated tribe. Or, the culture may encompass a very wide range of contrasting views, not necessarily consistent or compatible, perhaps not even interrelated, but rather divided into "water-tight compartments" as may be the case with so-called consociational democracies. However, we do not suggest that culture consists of all the assumptions held by all the members of a group. There is no requirement that everyone share a given belief. For practical purposes, we can ignore assumptions held only by very small proportions of the population. We consider below the special relevance, however, of some minorities, especially elites.

This conception of political culture owes much to recent anthropological writers. In his review of significant theoretical work on culture, Roger Keesing has shown that a common theme—cultures as "ideational codes"—runs through the literature, a theme found in the work of such diverse scholars as Ward Goodenough, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Clifford Geertz, and David Schneider. Drawing also on Chomsky's distinction between linguistic competence and performance, Keesing sums up the general view of culture as shared in its broad design and varying between individuals in its specificities . . . . It is his theory of what his fellows know, believe and mean, his theory of the code being followed, the game being played, in the society into which he was born . . . . But note that the actor's 'theory' of his culture, like his theory of his language, may be in large measure unconscious.  

What "'theory'" may be found in anyone's head is not, by our conception or by Keesing's, culture. Culture is interpersonal, covering a range of such
theories. Not everyone shares the same theory of his culture, and not everyone knows all aspects of his culture: "Thus a cultural description is always an abstracted composite." 5

Geertz makes a similar point when he writes that "culture is best seen not as complexes of concrete behavior patterns—customs, usages, traditions, habit clusters—... but as a set of control mechanisms—plans, recipes, rules, instructions (what computer engineers call 'programs')—for the governing of behavior." 6 While a distinction like this is helpful, we emphasize that we restrict culture to a particular type of control mechanism—assumptions or premises. Culture is thus distinct from other types of more explicit control mechanisms.

Several closely related consequences follow from this perspective. It implies a particular unit of analysis. Political culture is the property of a collectivity—nation, region, class, ethnic community, formal organization, party, or whatever. Individuals have beliefs, values, and attitudes but they do not have cultures.

But what kinds of collectivities have cultures? Most of the writing on political culture focuses on national cultures, as when Almond and Verba compare the cultures of five nations. Some studies focus on territorially defined units at the subnational level, such as the political cultures of American states or Canadian provinces. 7 Less frequently, we find studies of the cultural attributes of other social groupings: the "culture of poverty," "working class culture," "elite political culture," religious subcultures, and the like. We argue that culture may refer to any or all of these. Students of culture who wish to refine its utility as an explanatory concept must develop precise means of identifying the culture-bearing unit in different situations. We propose such a strategy in conjunction with our exposition of the logic of cultural explanation.

If a scholar is interested in culture primarily in a descriptive sense, he may specify a priori which collectivity interests him and then proceed to describe the patterns of assumptions within it. But if we use culture as an explanation, we must identify what it is about these collectivities which leads to the distinctive patterns of assumptions. Thus, for nations, we must ask whether their collective experience is important or whether the internation difference stems from the varying proportions of particular groups, each with its own unique experiences. If it is the latter, then our attention should shift to an enquiry about the cultural attributes of the subnational collectivities rather than the national one. Conversely, if our focus were on religious groups, but we found that Catholics in one nation differed strongly in political behavior from Catholics in another, then we would be led to hypothesize the nation as the relevant culture-bearing unit; and it would be national rather than religious cultures to which we would look for explanation. (We oversimplify for expository neatness; it may happen that both national and religious cultures are important.)

Hence, explanations based on national cultures can be persuasive only after
we have ruled out some structural and institutional explanations. Structure can refer, among other things, to the different proportions of individuals possessing certain positions or social characteristics: income levels, ethnicity, age, gender, urbanization, and so on. Societies can vary either in the proportions of people found in each category, or in the views held by people within similar categories, or both. If an internation difference disappears when structural proportions are controlled or "partialled out," then we have a structural explanation, not a cultural one, because the difference is accounted for by the relative size of a group in different nations. National culture is at work only when people in the same social categories, but in different nations, hold different assumptions. When a structural control eliminates the differences, then that control variable identifies a collectivity whose cultural attributes may be important. Whether the researcher is content to label "religion" or "class" or "ethnicity" as the explanation, rather than pursuing this investigation further, is a matter of choice. The distinction between structural and cultural, then, can be seen in either of two ways: as a means of ruling out some cultural explanations, or as a means of identifying which collectivities should be seen as bearers of the culture and hence potential components of a cultural explanation.

There is a useful rule of thumb in such cases: keep your eye on the dependent variable. If we examine a particular phenomenon on which two nations differ, then an explanation which "reduces" that difference to relative proportions of groups in each nation halts the search for further explanations. If we ask further why those nations have such different proportions of these groups, we have shifted to a different dependent variable, and we may hypothesize cultural phenomena as an explanation. At some stage in the analysis of any internation dissimilarity, both of these outcomes are likely to occur. That is, eventually we can reformulate most differences in structural terms, and eventually we will be tempted or forced to explain structural features in cultural terms. In this sense, it may be a matter of semantics whether explanations are called cultural or something else. By keeping clearly in mind the precise dependent variable, however, the primary explanation of that feature will either be structural (i.e., a matter of proportionalities) or not. This gives us a rule for labelling the explanation as cultural or structural; but even if it must be called structural, note that such an explanation identifies a potential culture-bearing unit.

"Structure" may also be used in a second sense, to refer not to the distribution of individuals across social, economic, or demographic categories, but rather to political institutions. Unlike proportionalities, these are collective phenomena, rather than aggregations of individuals. For example, the extent of party competition or the availability of a large number of interest groups may affect citizens' sense of political efficacy: the more competition, for example, the more valuable they feel their votes to be. Here again, if such institutional features account for the intergroup differences, we would not make a claim for the explanatory power of political culture. At the next stage of analysis,
however, the presence or absence of certain institutions might be the dependent variable; cultural explanation could prove important in those cases.

One cannot assess the relative importance of structural and cultural explanations within a single collectivity, since these are confounded. After the relevant comparisons have demonstrated the importance of cultural factors, however, the fact that assumptions are distributed in particular proportions accounts in cultural terms for certain kinds of political characteristics. Therefore, the question should not be "are cultural explanations possible?" but rather "at what stage of analysis are they most useful?"

Political culture defines the range of acceptable possible alternatives from which groups or individuals may, other circumstances permitting, choose a course of action. Except in the limiting case in which everyone shares precisely the same assumption, culture does not explain the particular choices which individuals make. Its explanatory power is primarily restricted to "setting the agenda" over which political contests occur. Other factors must explain the choice of a particular element of the subset identified in that culture. These supplementary factors include personality, role, self-interest, and so on, at the individual level, or simply the relative power of organized groups at the societal or collective level of analysis.¹⁰

Since the actual choice an individual or a group makes within the acceptable range of the culture is explained by other factors, many criticisms of political culture lose their force. Likewise, the difficulty of establishing the causal link between political culture and variables it presumably explains, a problem many commentators have noted, is lessened when one can restrict the types of dependent variables and when one can specify more clearly the content of political culture.

In summary, the most significant feature of our approach is its sharp distinction between political culture as a descriptive category and as an explanation. Political culture as descriptive of a collectivity entails only that the group exhibits a given range and distribution of (largely unconscious) assumptions about its political life. Cultural explanations, on the other hand, utilize this information in conjunction with structural features to account for the differences between collectivities on certain dependent variables. The use of culture for explanation, therefore, must always be comparative.

**Political Culture as Assumptions**

It would be premature to provide a detailed classification of the types of assumptions which constitute political culture. Difficult as it may be to step out of socially engendered outlooks, we nevertheless offer a tentative list of types of assumptions and some examples. We hope thereby to stimulate others to make their own examination of the range of assumptions underlying political
life in diverse groups. Some of the types of assumptions which seem likely to provide fruitful grounds for cultural description and comparison include the following:

1. Assumptions about the orderliness of the universe. These will necessarily be very general.
2. Presumptions about the nature of causality. Is the world random? Are events foredestined? Inevitable? Are human agents more or less important than impersonal material causes?
3. What are the principal goals of political life?
4. Should one try to maximize gains, or to minimize losses? In other words, what assumptions are made about the relative payoffs of optimistic or pessimistic strategies?
5. Who belongs to one’s political community? Is it a vaguely bounded community, or is it one marked by sharp “we-they” distinctions? Do the boundaries vary with types of situations, or are they more or less unchanging? To whom or to what does one owe any obligation?
6. What types of events, actions, or institutions are deemed political (as opposed to economic, social, etc.), or is a sharp line drawn at all? Is “the political” a positively or negatively valued domain?
7. Assumptions about others—their trustworthiness, public spiritedness, etc.—and about how one should relate to them.

This list should be sufficient to indicate that the content of political culture—considered as assumptions which narrow the range of alternative actions that are possible or desirable—diverges radically from the attitudes, affect, and personality traits usually included in most previous definitions.\(^\text{11}\)

Some of the assumptions are very general. They involve broad views of the nature of the world and not just of political life. An example of such a fundamental view is whether or not events have systematic causes or whether they are largely fortuitous or accidental. Individuals who assume that any given event has an identifiable set of causes will feel and act quite differently from people who believe that things “just happen” or that humans cannot explain or modify them.

To make an assumption about the causative status of the universe, or at least of human affairs, will surely color one’s view of events and limit one’s attention to certain aspects to the exclusion of others. A fatalistic outlook, or one posited on the superior knowledge of certain elites, limits one’s view of effective political action largely to propitiation of deities or to supplication of leaders.

Similarly, is politics seen as a zero-sum game or as an expandable-sum game? Each of these outlooks has a different implication for one’s willingness to seek solutions through compromise with political “enemies.” Of course, we do not suggest that a person always views politics in only one way, but we suspect that for most people one view predominates. To the extent that there is agreement on one view, this should affect the kinds of political rhetoric to
which a group responds and the kinds of leadership it finds congenial or inspiring. The distribution of zero-sum rather than expandable-sum assumptions should vary widely between collectivities; and these variations should be associated with marked contrasts in how different populations play the game of politics.

The causal status of any assumption is permissive rather than deterministic. By this we mean that persons or groups making the assumption do not automatically engage in a particular action; the final action depends as well on the existence of relevant institutions or leadership. The assumption opens the possibility of action, and it disposes the members of the group sharing it to certain actions more than to others. Mobilization of a group in support of a compromise worked out by political leaders will be made easier if politics, generally, is not a zero-sum game.

A concept such as political efficacy also embodies some basic assumptions. The positive correlation between agreement with statements like "I believe my elected representative pays attention to my opinions" and the degree of political activity depends on the widespread acceptance of several assumptions about political and social life: that participation is available to people like themselves; that it is legitimate or good to participate; and that political participation can, and often does, have an effect on outputs. All these assumptions may be false, but citizens' belief in them is what counts. Finally, feelings of efficacy rest on a generally nonfatalistic view of the world: trying to influence political events leads to an increased likelihood of the desired effect. The contrary views are that one should leave well enough alone to avoid making things worse and that things happen no matter what one does.

Note again the permissive nature of these assumptions. None of the assumptions requires persons making them to undertake any action, but they predispose individuals in certain directions; whether they perform these actions will depend on opportunities afforded them by political institutions and by their position in the social structure. Similarly, failure to make these assumptions does not mean that such people will engage in no political activity; it does mean, we believe, that such actions will be performed for different reasons, such as loyalty to a leader.

The efficacy example refers to a very general orientation to politics. But exploration of underlying assumptions may also illuminate much more concrete issues of public policy. For example, Ronald Manzer has traced the evolution of Canadian public priorities in economic and social policy. He shows how they are related to prevailing theories of the social and economic order held by dominant elites. He argues that the principles underlying policymaking are similar to the paradigms of scientific communities in that they summarize the world view of policymaking elites and they limit the appropriate set of policy instruments. Similarly, in *The Gift Relationship*, Richard Titmuss shows how the differing ways Britain and the United States provide blood for medical
purposes stem from differences in fundamental assumptions about the obligations of citizens to each other, about the definition of community, and the like.  

**Culture and Personality**

The view that a culture can be described in terms of modal or majority personality or character types conflicts with our approach because of our emphasis on the range and distribution of traits rather than on the mode or average. Similarly, the content of culture differs markedly from personality, since it refers to basic premises of action or guiding assumptions about the world, while personality refers to behavior patterns or to behavioral dispositions.

That culture and personality obviously interact and that they may both be inferred from interviews and survey questionnaires blur the line of demarcation. Of course, other methods may be used to assess either culture or personality, as we suggest below, but the use of individual responses easily leads some scholars to think of cultures in terms of the proportions of individual personality types in the collectivity. Our notion of political culture as a property of collectivities precludes such an approach. Instead, one should examine the interaction between psychological and cultural dimensions seen independently. The best approach regards personality as an individual’s characteristic strategies of adaptation to his environment and inner needs. Culture thus becomes a part of his environment.

Personality traits and their organization, of course, influence which elements within a culture an individual is most likely to internalize and express, although this is also fashioned partly by social position and role set. For example, a great many of Richard Nixon’s personal attributes and beliefs (politics is war, enemies are to be destroyed, etc.) are closely related to many themes in the range of American culture. His personality found support within the culture, and he appropriated from the culture those features he found most congenial. In the same way, orientations found among Barber’s “active-positive” presidents (politics is fun, men are generally good, etc.) are also recurring themes in American culture. “Positive” and “negative” personalities, then, respond to different elements within the broad range of variants in American political culture and select some but deny or ignore others.

This perspective highlights another important way in which culture and personality relate to each other. In cultures with a very limited range of assumptions, there is less scope for individual variation based on personality to influence political behavior. The relative homogeneity of the political culture, by offering only one or a few viable alternatives, severely constrains the play of personality. In a large, complex, broad-range culture, on the other hand, we can
expect to find many different—even contradictory—strands which grant great latitude to different personality types to pursue different adaptive strategies legitimately. In such societies, personality, role, and social position play a larger part than culture in determining the exact forms of political behavior, although culture still "sets the agenda."

On the other hand, even in diverse collectivities, actors may find themselves constrained by the roles they play and by the expectations and assumptions characteristic of others in their social milieux. The effect of culture on individual behavior may thus develop in two ways: through internalization as a result of socialization and character formation, or through the imposition of external social constraints. One cannot function successfully in society while remaining too far outside the norms, assumptions, and expectations of other people with whom one must deal regularly.

Personality and culture are conceptually distinct, but often intimately related, dimensions of empirical situations. Personality, role, and social structure mediate the relationship between culture as a range of options and concrete individual behavior patterns. As explanations, these concepts supplement rather than compete with each other.

Structural, Institutional, and Cultural Explanations

Structural and institutional explanations pose the major alternatives to explanation by political culture. We use the term "structural" in several special senses. Structures may signify regularized patterns of behavior, especially in formal or informal organizations; these we will call "institutions." Structural explanations, however, may also be conceptualized in terms of proportions of individuals. Social classes may also be institutions, but social class as a structural explanation consists of the relative proportions of a collectivity which fall into the different social classes. Such proportions or variables pose important threats to cultural explanations, because the experiences they represent are believed to be important determinants of behavior and attitudes in their own right and because they are easily confounded with political culture as a distributional characteristic of a collectivity.

An example from Almond and Verba’s well-known study will illustrate our position. They demonstrate very large differences among five nations in sense of political competence.17 These differences in competence may stem from distinct national cultures or from the fact that the nations differ in such matters as proportion of educated people. In fact, the latter is the case: virtually all the internation difference is accounted for when education is controlled. In our terms, then, the explanation is a structural one: it is the pattern or proportion of structural positions that varies within this set of countries. We entertain a cultural explanation for the difference only when persons in similar structural
positions possess divergent orientations. In fact, Almond and Verba present such a case: large internation differences in how people would attempt to influence government—by individual or cooperative action—persist even after relevant controls.\textsuperscript{18}

When controls for social or demographic categories reduce to insignificance the intercollectivity differences on the dependent variable, the explanation should be termed a structural one. If, on the other hand, such controls reveal that people with similar structural positions diverge between collectivities on the dependent variable, then either there are structural variables which have not been examined (or have been inadequately measured or controlled), or there are cultural differences which account for the observed intergroup variation.

There are several reasons for thinking that it will be even more difficult to sort out institutional from cultural influences than it was for the structural variables mentioned above. Institutional features, like cultural ones, are collective characteristics rather than simple aggregates. They are thus much harder to measure and quantify. There will also be many instances of complex interaction between institutional and cultural influences, insofar as both factors serve the function of setting an agenda. Nevertheless, as with proportions, we suggest that the institutional effects should be partialled out first. That is, if differences between collectivities exist, we should begin by looking for an institutional explanation. If differences exist, despite institutional similarity, then our confidence that the explanation is cultural is increased.\textsuperscript{19}

This two-stage approach may be unnecessarily severe. No one type of explanation is generally better than another. Our concern here is entirely practical. To the extent that structural or institutional variables are simpler, more easily measured, more widely applicable, or more universally understood than cultural variables, it makes sense to try them first.

Most important, the strategy we have underlined constitutes an appropriate search procedure for locating the structures and institutions which are the relevant culture-bearing units. What accounts for the existence of particular policies, attitudes, or behaviors in one collectivity rather than another? If it is the proportion of people with a given characteristic (religion, ethnicity, age, education), or if it is the presence or predominance of a given institution (bureaucracy, political party, electoral system), then that property or institution identifies the culture-bearing unit for that dependent variable.\textsuperscript{20} An explanation of that property or institution will involve, at one remove, the same type of analysis, and so on with the causes of that cause. Each step in the analysis has two possible outcomes: the relevant collectivities explain the differences on the dependent variable, or the demonstration that they do not explain the differences reveals the most likely culture-bearing unit. Hence, at the point of departure, one may not have a cultural explanation; but explaining the pattern of structural proportions or institutional forms which mark the culture "carriers" will eventually lead to an explanation we would designate as cultural.
Inference and Evidence

Several characteristics of political culture pose special problems for measuring and describing it. First, it is often hard to disentangle from structural and psychological variables. Second, it is an abstract concept, not a concrete thing. It cannot be directly seen, heard, or touched; therefore it must be inferred from other clues. Third, for most of the members of a society, culture is unconscious, inexplicit, taken for granted; hence we cannot easily ask people about it directly. Fourth, while individuals participate in a culture, as a collective attribute of society, we do not describe a culture by simply aggregating all the individuals. How then do we find it?

One might begin by asking why we should use a hypothetical construct to explain anything. First, the social sciences have had considerable success with several hypothetical constructs: personality, attitude, role, power, and so on. Nor are the social sciences unique in this regard; gravity is a central hypothetical construct in physics, and yet no physicist knows what it is. Second, if one believes everything has a cause, and if other plausible causes cannot be found, it is reasonable to postulate a construct such as political culture. Thus, after controls for structural and institutional variables, political culture is postulated to account for limitations in the range of options, norms, and behaviors to be found in a population.

Individuals manifest or express their political culture without generally being aware of it. Political cultures consist largely of unconscious assumptions, so taken for granted that, except for a few rare and sensitive individuals, members of a culture seldom have occasion to question them. Cultural norms are likely to become explicit and openly debated only in times of rapid change, spectacular violation of the norms, and the like. ‘‘Unconscious’’ is thus used here not in the Freudian sense of ‘‘repressed,’’ but as ‘‘taken for granted.’’ Each person assumes that everyone else shares the same belief; or an assumption is so basic to people’s outlook that it is literally impossible for them to conceive how it could be different. One would become conscious of such assumptions only when they are challenged; given the homogeneity of the primary groups in which most people participate, such challenges are infrequent.

This feature of culture poses some advantages and some difficulties for research. The advantage is that when interviewing or observing respondents, it is harder for them to ‘‘fake’’ or to give self-serving and pragmatic answers. Similarly, the responses are less likely to be facile, short-run responses to transitory contemporary political phenomena. The disadvantage is, of course, that it becomes difficult to elicit the underlying assumptions. Apart from the general techniques of inference we have mentioned, four other strategies are likely to overcome the difficulty. First, some individuals in the society are likely to be thrust into positions in which they encounter different assumptions; they may thus be led to greater awareness of the premises of their own actions.
Political leaders are an example. Moreover, certain groups or individuals are likely to be especially sensitive observers or critics of their own culture: poets, novelists, journalists, and so on. In addition, rebels, members of "countercultures," or malcontents may often be able to tell us a great deal about a culture; we can learn as much from those who reject a system of assumptions as from those who have learned and internalized it. Hence, students of culture should concentrate some of their resources on such specialized respondents.

Second, the principle of confrontation and comparison with different groups suggests that it would be fruitful to study individuals who have moved from one society to another. One could begin by studying exchange students. What strikes them as odd, inexplicable, different, or discomforting about the other group? What did they have to learn or unlearn in order to "pass"?

Third, cultural assumptions may be clear only in contrast to those of another culture. We argued above that cultural explanations logically entail comparative research. Here we suggest a practical consequence of this requirement—by comparing and contrasting, we become aware of what has been taken for granted. Hartz, for example, would probably never have formulated his theory about the Lockean foundations of American liberalism without his comparative research on England and other societies.21

Fourth, experimental techniques can play a central role in the study of cultures.22 Since assumptions about the political world are generally taken for granted by their carriers, one cannot ask directly about them as though they were consciously held opinions on political issues. One must elicit them in carefully structured and controlled situations, or one must "read between the lines" when analyzing documents or behavior. One must, therefore, guard against the possibility that an investigator will impute ideas, assumptions, or meanings to ambiguous responses, statements, or behavior. One safeguard is to use laboratory experiments to test hypotheses about cultural assumptions and their causal status.

Such experiments alone cannot provide a complete methodology for the analysis of political culture. Interviews, surveys, field observation, historical analysis, documents, literary materials, and many other sources should also be used. Some source materials—especially novels, public rhetoric, ceremonies, and social and political criticism—may be especially fruitful for formulating hypotheses about the presence of fundamental assumptions of the culture, while other materials or methods may be necessary to determine the extent to which these assumptions are widely shared and to test hypotheses about their causal influence on behavior or attitudes. It is in regard to this last task that we feel experimental devices will prove most essential.

Some will argue that experiments are useless for studying political culture because they are so far removed from the complex intertwining of elements in the real world. This degree of abstraction, of course, is precisely their main attraction. Because we create the conditions and manipulate their administra-
tion, we know which precedes which, and thus we can settle more satisfactorily questions of casual priority.

Experimentation has several advantages. For one thing, situations of conflict between values, norms, or people can be created expressly to see how conflicts are resolved. Such situations in the real world may appear so infrequently or covertly that they can be studied only by devious means. Those which appear frequently may be confounded with other features of social life so that certainty about bases of choice may result only from limiting the number of variables. Second, experimental conditions favor the creation of situations which are deliberately ambiguous. The "instinctive" reaction to ambiguity may reveal the hidden assumptions at the core of political culture. The study of optical illusions has provided evidence of the usefulness of this approach. Third, once one has formulated hypotheses about the nature of the assumptions in the culture, one can vary them experimentally to assess their effect on other variables.

Finally, experimental settings present ideal opportunities for the testing of questions, items, and formats for survey research and interviews. In the laboratory situation, one can vary wording, instructions, and interviewer characteristics systematically in an effort to improve research devices for eliciting these subtle assumptions in the wider population in which one has a primary interest. In this way, experimental findings may be used as pretests for survey research. Conversely, experiments might be utilized subsequent to survey research; when assumptions are known to be common in a population, experiments will help to clarify their possible causal influence on perception, cognition, or action.

Despite serious methodological obstacles, political culture can be studied by normal social science techniques. Many deficiencies of previous research derive from a failure to use enough different techniques. Hypothesis formation requires a playful and broad-ranging familiarity with anecdotal material as well as systematic research. Estimates of the extensiveness of assumptions, norms, beliefs, and behavior require survey research and personal interviewing. Tests of hypotheses about the causal status of cultural assumptions, and in some cases measurement of assumptions, can most effectively occur in laboratory settings.

What Does Political Culture Explain?

Consider the restrictions we have imposed on the concept of political culture as explanation. First, we have argued that it is a collective property of groups such as nations or classes. What it may explain are differences between groups in the range of options considered by the population in deciding on a course of action. Second, political culture is a "second-order" explanation, appropriately applied only after institutional and structural explanations have been ruled out
or in conjunction with such explanations. Structural and institutional features may be shown to be relevant "culture bearers," but alone they do not constitute cultural explanations. Third, because the implicit assumptions which form its content are taken for granted, it constitutes a largely unconscious perceptual screen which determines how one views or understands a situation.

Given these restrictions, what is the logic of cultural explanation, and to what range of dependent variables might it be usefully applied? First, it must be comparative. Logically, culture cannot be used to explain variations within the unit, since by definition all groups within the unit share in the culture. For culture to be used within a nation, then, the culture-bearing units must be subnational groups. The only other condition in which culture can be used within nations is when comparisons are made over time. Thus, one might hypothesize that changes in the range of basic assumptions between one period and the next help account for other political changes. Here, of course, the logic of comparison is maintained.

Second, culture as an explanation is seldom direct and seldom operates alone. Rather, it is generally permissive and almost always acts in conjunction with other variables. This is largely because the culture is defined by the range of assumptions found in the society. Hence, one cannot infer or predict directly from cultural assumption to individual attitude, individual act, or collective decision. Such an inference requires that the assumption or belief combine with particular information, goals and interests, personality needs, and the like. The cultural assumptions provide the lens through which these more proximate political forces are assessed; they influence what kind of interpretation will be placed on political forces, but alone they cannot account for the result. The broader the range of assumptions found within a culture, the more weight must be given to noncultural factors, since there will be fewer cultural constraints; to put it another way, the larger the number of items on the agenda, the larger the role of noncultural decision factors.

Political culture should seldom be seen as competing with other variables, but as a complement to them. Which other variables it most powerfully interacts with depends largely on what sorts of things we want to explain. If we are interested in individual attitudes, the focus will be on the interrelationships of culture, personality, and social position. If we are interested in public policy, the emphasis will be on which groups, occupying what part of the cultural range, are most influential.

What elements of political life seem most and least amenable to cultural explanation? Cultural factors have often been used to understand very broad system characteristics: stability, democracy, authoritarianism, and level of economic or political development. While relationships between such dimensions and assumptions about the political world are plausible, we propose that this level of analysis should not remain a preoccupation of students of culture, because, as dependent variables, such phenomena are simply too broad and
vague. 24 The wide sweep of so much writing on culture seems to invite
application to equally sweeping dependent variables. But if it is to be a useful
concept, culture needs to be much more clearly specified and so must the
dependent variables it is designed to explain.

At a second level, some scholars have pointed to culture to explain individual
attitudes and behavior, but we doubt that it can do so alone. Political culture is
an important part of individual action insofar as it provides the repertoire or
range of options available. Thus an "authoritarian personality" in one culture
is likely to behave differently from one in another culture—in the language and
symbols he uses, the objects of his attention, and so on. 25 This is one reason
why instruments designed to measure authoritarianism in one society may be
ineffective or misleading in another. We have already noted how political
culture may affect the sense of efficacy as a motive for action. Other psycholog-
ical states which culture might also foster include: feelings of frustration at
being unable to do what seems obvious according to cultural assumptions;
feelings of guilt or shame at doing or contemplating things which are not natural
or ideal for that culture; and feelings of confusion which result from performing
actions one believes right or natural, but which have contrary or puzzling
effects because one's allies or opponents operate on different assumptions. 26
The investigation of culturally induced feelings of this sort might be particularly
fruitful in cases where members of different cultural groups come into contact:
the interaction of French- and English-Canadians in a bicultural civil service;
confrontations between bureaucrats and citizen protest groups; and internation-
al negotiations. 27 When different cultural groups interact, the results may be
incomprehension, frustration, inability to cooperate, misunderstanding of each
other's signals, failure to agree, and so on. Thus, political culture plays a part in
explaining the actions people undertake, and it also explains in part the value
they place on these actions and the feelings they have about them.

Brian Barry contrasts the "sociological" approach to individual behavior
(by which he mainly means Parsonian value analysis) with an "economic"
approach in which self-interest and utility maximization are the central assump-
tions. 28 Although he argues that the economic approach contrasts with the more
culturally oriented sociological approach, in our terms, culture enters into both.
Self-interest and the idea of a utility calculus are themselves cultural concepts.
Similarly, cultural assumptions will affect the kinds of factors which enter into
any assessment of benefits and costs. Knowledge of the culture will also be
necessary to predict the reactions of others to what one does. The value of game
theory as a tool of comparative analysis is that it consists of an extremely simple
set of cultures where few assumptions are made and those are explicit. 29

At a third level, political culture is likely to help explain certain characteris-
tics of political institutions. One might distinguish between institutions in the
sense of formal statutory or constitutional creations and their actual operation.
Culture may play a part in both senses. The structural differences between
British cabinet and American presidential government may reflect very different assumptions about authority and sovereignty. Once an institution exists, the culture may play a more obvious role in whether and how people utilize it. Political culture also helps to sustain institutions through a process of consensual validation. What we mean by institutionalized behavior, after all, is a pattern of interactions which are highly repetitive and mutually intelligible, precisely because people in that milieu operate on similar assumptions and take for granted that these behaviors and opinions are correct. Indeed, this is just what Parsons and other action theorists mean by "structure": interactions are structured or institutionalized only to the extent that they reflect internalized patterns of normative or cultural expectations. Without shared assumptions—such as the norm of reciprocity—it is hard to see how an institution like the United States Congress could function at all. This again suggests the close interaction between cultural and institutional forces, which makes them difficult to disentangle in practice. Over the long run, institutions modify the range of assumptions of those who operate them and those who are affected by them. But in the short run, cultural assumptions are likely to have a role in specifying the operation of institutions. For this reason, cultural data may be fruitful in predicting the effects of institutional and organizational changes.

Political culture has been less attractive to students of policy analysis and policymaking than to other political scientists. But our stress on culture as setting the agenda and as reducing the range of alternatives to be considered suggests that cultural explanations of policy should be explored more fully, especially in comparative settings. For example, in his study of differences in the extent of public ownership and breadth of the welfare state, Anthony King concludes that "ideas," rather than institutions, interest, or demands, best explain the variations. Culture is unlikely to be of much help in explaining why alternative A was chosen over alternative B—but it may be of great help in understanding why A and B were considered, while no thought was given to C, D, or E.

We might distinguish here between two aspects of the study of policy formation: first, the procedures or processes through which policy is debated and decided; and second, the substance or content itself. In a procedural sense, culture would affect the ways policymakers interact and their style of behavior: what forms of behavior are legitimate; what criteria (scientific, religious, etc.) should be applied to policies; how the policy field is perceived (as consensual or conflictual, zero- or variable-sum); who is permitted to participate; or the balance between voluntarism and coercion. Theodore Lowi’s discussion of the "public philosophy," Alexander George’s and others’ analysis of the "operational code," Robert Putnam’s examination of elite political cultures, and Michel Crozier’s "bureaucratic phenomenon" are all studies of the impact of cultural factors on the policy process. In this area, as in all the other aspects of
politics discussed here, it must be assumed that cultural factors would collaborate with institutions, group interests, and many other variables.

In a substantive sense, culture may help to explain the scope and content of government activity. These depend partly on the distribution of assumptions about the role of the state, about the desirable balance between public and private activity, and about collective versus individual decisions. In particular policy areas, the assumptions and theories prevalent among relevant decision makers would be paramount. For example, in explaining international differences in social welfare policies, we would want to know what assumptions were held by elite members about the causes of poverty, the characteristics of the poor, and so on. Again, culture interacts with other factors. It is closely related to the more explicit policy statements embodied in ideologies.

The influence of culture may be more direct in some policy areas than in others. Environmental constraints on resources and opportunities and the common character of problems may ensure that even when policymaking procedures differ greatly between collectivities, the results are much the same. This may be true in such areas as fiscal policy. At the other extreme, cultures may allow a great deal of freedom. Policy with respect to abortion, criminal justice, or drug use might more fully reflect cultural assumptions than "objective" environmental constraints. In substantive policy, culture remains primarily permissive: it does not determine precisely what will be done; it conditions the range of issues to which attention will be devoted; it influences the way those issues will be defined; and it limits the range of options considered within a given issue domain.

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Although we consider political culture a useful explanatory tool, our goal has been to elucidate its role by severely restricting the types of things it should explain. In particular, we suggest that it be reserved for explaining political differences between collectivities, when structural and institutional explanations can be shown to be insufficient. By corollary, cultural, institutional, and structural explanations are not competitors, but collaborators; all are needed for a full understanding of why collectivities exhibit different institutional arrangements, why their institutions work in various ways, and why individuals believe and act in particular fashions. The notion of explanation must therefore be understood to be more complex than is implicit in most of the literature on political culture. Instead of asking whether institutions cause culture or culture causes institutions, we should look for their joint effects.

NOTES

1. We speak of "assumptions" rather than "beliefs," "values," "norms," or similar phrases because this term carries fewer connotations within this field of study. We can use it, therefore, in a very general way, similar to its meaning in logic.


4. Ibid., p. 89. "I'd like to know whether epochs that possessed culture knew the word at all, or used it. Naïveté, unconsciousness, taken-for-grantedness, seems to me to be the first criterion of the constitution to which we give this name" Adrian Leuerkuhn, in Thomas Mann, Dr. Faustus (New York, 1968), p. 61.

5. Ibid.


8. What we call "structural explanation" is quite similar to (though more broadly conceived than) what is called "demographic explanation" by Arthur L. Stinchcombe, Constructing Social Theories (New York, 1968), pp. 57-79.


10. Note, therefore, the sharp difference between our concept and a standard definition of "value" (which has often been considered an elementary unit of culture): "A value is a conception, explicit or implicit, distinctive of an individual or characteristic of a group, of the desirable which influences the selection from available modes, means, and ends of action." Clyde Kluckhohn, "Values and Value-Orientations in the Theory of Action," in Talcott Parsons and Edward A. Shils, eds. Toward a General Theory of Action, (New York, 1962), p. 395. Values, in other words, direct one's choice among the alternative presented by the [political] culture.


15. For a systematic review of conceptualizations of personality, see Paul M. Sniderman, Personality and Democratic Politics (Berkeley, 1975), pp. 9-17, 65-115. He argues that personality affects political behavior primarily by its influence on social learning conditions.

16. See, for example, Garry Wills, Nixon Agonistes (New York, 1971), esp. part I; and James David Barber, Presidential Character (Englewood Cliffs [N.J.], 1972), especially chapter 1 and part five. Note also that "character" and situation collaborate, in Barber's framework, to produce presidential behavior, just as we posit a collaborative relationship between political culture and structure in understanding political behavior more generally.


18. Ibid., p. 191.

19. Our logic parallels that developed by Jae-on Kim, John R. Petrocik, and Stephen N. Enokson, "Voter Turnout Among the American States: Systemic and Individual Components," American Political Science Review, LXIX (March 1975), 107-23. They asked what proportion of variation in turnout was due to the sociodemographic composition of the electorate and to two "system-level" or institutional factors (competitiveness and legal restrictions on voting). Since these two sets of variables accounted for most of the variance, political culture appears to be a relatively unimportant component of the explanation in this instance.


25. Sniderman, pp. 5-6, 309ff.


29. For a further discussion of "games" as cultures, see Elkins, "Experimental Political Culture."

