

4.4 Influence of Political Events on Ideology

Explain how cultural factors influence political attitudes and socialization.

The relative importance of major political events to the development of individual political attitudes is an example of political socialization. Kings and their kind reigned over us for most of human history. How did we learn to be democratic? Or as Harold Laswell so famously asked, "To what extent is it possible to achieve democratic conduct in adult life without forming democratic character in early life" (See his essay, "Democratic Character," 1951)?

Political scientists Almond and Verba spent careers trying to answer these questions. In doing so, they wrote one of the most influential works of political science ever. These two giants in political science supplanted qualitative common sense with detailed quantitative research. Using a comparative model, Almond and Verba compiled a comprehensive empirical analysis of political socialization.

The *Civic Culture* studied in this text assessed the "psychological orientations of citizens in and towards their political systems." Almond and Verba found that in most healthy democracies systems were required to encourage political participation. A series of complex processes transmitted democratic action through a variety of social institutions. Family, peers, school, work and the political system itself can help meld a civic culture necessary if a democracy is to be sustained.

Transmission of this civic culture is not to be taken for granted. Almond and Verba found three types of citizens. Parochial citizens were political sleepwalkers. They had little to no knowledge of the political system. Subjects were somewhat aware but relied on others to engage in the political process. These citizens were largely passive. Participants were both competent and confident that they could understand and influence their political systems. These civically minded citizens were found in greater numbers in the United States. Efficacy continues to be higher here than in most other democratic countries. When democracies fail around the world we often forget this critical discovery.

Almond and Verba's research on strong civic cultures appeared to find a causal relationship with intentionality. Our classrooms need to be more than mere outposts for formal assessments. Teaching to tests, albeit important, is not the end of education. Finding platoons of young citizens is our muster call. We do not teach a government class but rather encourage a democratic lifestyle.

Almond and Verba wrote: "... Educational attainment appears to have the most important demographic effect on political attitudes. Among the demographic variables usually investigated—sex, place of residence, occupation, income, age, and so on—none compares with the educational variable in the extent to which it seems to determine political attitudes."

Furthermore, they added: "... Education has so many different kinds of effects. For one thing, people do learn in schools: they learn specific subjects as well as skills useful for political participation. And they learn the norms of political participation as well. Much of the learning may be through direct teaching; some of it may be more indirect. Not only does education influence political perspectives, it also places the individual in social situations where he meets others of like educational attainment, and this tends to reinforce the effect of his own education."

Almond and Verba's seminal work *Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (1963) made quantitative research the new normal. Normative statements would no longer rule political science. More importantly, Almond and Verba empirically supported what we already knew. The success of democratic governments has less to do with its institutions and a whole lot more to do with its people.

King George in 1776 was deposed not because of words on a parchment but rather because of the thousands of citizens who demanded his ouster. "We the People" is no platitude. Again, it was Harold Lasswell who wrote, "A democratic community is one in which human dignity is realized in theory and fact." The kings of this world should take notice. It is the peoples time. Almond and Verba's *Civic Culture* still lives.

In our time, our Sons of Liberty and Daughters of the Revolution are not motivated by British troops on our soil or imposing tax policies by the Mother country. Today, our ideological commitments, to a great extent, are influenced by events – both political and social. Even a short list of such events will prove the point where no proof is needed. Think about how the event of 9/11 changed the way we think about civil liberties and national security. Think about how the great recession of 2008 changed our attitudes about government involvement in our economy. Think about how the election of Donald Trump changed the way we talk about politics. Think about how the murder of George Floyd changed the way we think about civil rights and policing.

Politics and culture are intertwined in complex ways. As much as we would like to think that human agency is at the core of our political beliefs, we would be mistaken. More so, resigned to the idea that our demographics have triggered our destiny too would be inadequate. A closer look at our politics and our partisan loyalties would show that they are always changing, and that they are often dependent upon events outside of our control. I now understand what was is meant by this old political maxim, "politics ain't beanbag."