

Unit 8: Political Culture and Ethics I

Unit 8 Learning Objectives How does political culture influence the legislature?

After studying this unit you should be able to:

- Define political culture.
- Explain why political culture may influence the functioning of a given political regime.
- Discuss some instances in which the performance of political institutions was actually influenced by political-cultural factors.
- Assess whether it is correct to argue that the adoption of ethics rules, ethics codes, ethics reforms are facilitated by specific types of political cultures.
- Explain why the proper functioning of an ethics regime requires the existence of a homogeneous political culture among the individuals to whom it applies.
- Discuss whether it is true that MPs actually have a homogenous set of political attitudes, orientation, principles and values.

Introduction

What is meant by political culture? Do certain types of political cultures encourage greater compliance with ethics reforms, or even prevent the occurrence of ethics violations entirely? This unit will un-package the concept of political culture in order to investigate whether the effectiveness of ethics reforms are influenced by specific types of political culture. Political culture will be defined as the pattern of individual attitudes and cognitive, affective and evaluative orientations toward politics among the members of a given political system (Gabriel Almond and Sydeny Verba). The Political Culture and Ethics unit considers why these orientations might influence how a political system functions and, taking it a bit further, what kind of analysis has already been done and what are the results? (Robert Putnam in his *Making Democracy Work* (1993).

Political Culture Defined

Political culture is the pattern of individual attitudes and orientations toward politics among members of a political system (Almond and Verba, 1963). It is the subjective realm that underlies and gives meaning to political actions. Several components influence individual political orientations such as beliefs, and affective orientations like feelings of attachment about political objects, and evaluative orientations like judgments and opinions about political objects. These three dimensions are interrelated and can be combined in a variety of ways.

These orientations can significantly influence the way a political system works. In fact, the demands made upon a system, the responses to laws and to appeals for support, and the conduct of individuals in their political role, are shaped and conditioned by an orientation pattern. Cognitive, affective and evaluative orientations form the latent political tendencies and propensities for political behavior.

Robert Putnam (1993) revisited the concept of political culture. According to Putnam, the differences in performance are due to the interaction of two sets of factors: one is socio-economic modernity, and the other is civic community or political culture. Putnam explains the inconsistency of regional governments' success through the Italian example, in which the institutional performance in Northern Italian regions is more efficient and productive than in the Southern regions. He defends a correlation between institutional performance and development, but he suggests that this correlation may be spurious. In fact "what our simple analysis cannot reveal is whether modernity is a cause of performance ...whether performance is perhaps in some way a cause of modernity, whether both are influenced by a third factor...or whether the link between modernity and performance is even more complex" (p.86).

After developing an interesting measure of "civic-mindedness", Putnam finds that institutional performance is highly correlated with such a characteristic, and that this conclusion should be considered as a determinant of performance.

The Relationship between Political Culture and Ethics Regimes

What is the relationship between political culture and ethics regimes? This question has two possible meanings. First, it may suggest that political culture is conducive to ethics reforms and the adoption of codes of conduct and ethics regimes. Second, it may indicate that the proper functioning of an ethics regime requires the existence of a homogenous political culture, which is of a common set of attitudes and values.

When do the relationships develop? What are the positive and negative impacts of such a relationship? Some scholarly work suggests that the adoption of ethics reforms is not caused by specific political and cultural conditions, but rather represents a response to media investigations, to the disclosure of corruption and other forms of misconduct, and thus falling levels of public trust and to the need to reconstruct voters' confidence in political institutions. This does not however mean that ethics reforms are totally unrelated to political culture.

Some scholars suggest that the success of codes of conduct and other types of ethics reforms depend, to a large extent, on whether the individual to which it applies actually has a common set of political attitudes and values (Skelcher and Snape). A code of conduct works only if the individuals it is intended to govern have a common understanding of what is appropriate and inappropriate what represents an ethics violation, what should be done to prevent ethics violations, and so on. Interestingly, empirical evidence collected among British MPs reveals that MPs are far from sharing a homogenous political culture (Mancuso).

For example some posit that a code of conduct assumes a certain level of principle among the individuals to which it applies and a level of transparency in the decision-making process to avoid violations to the code. (Skelcher and Snape, 2001).

Likewise, an assertion is made that MPs can be relieved on for uniform principles of good judgment and thus the House of Commons grants a great deal of discretion among

MPs to avoid ethical dilemmas, without consideration for the variety of views represented by the MPs, representing another reason for no correlation between political and cultural ethics. On many important issues there is stark disparity among MPs as to what constitutes acceptable behavior, and many are engaging in activities that others find reprehensible (p.1). (Maureen Mancuso 1993)

Mancuso conducted a study of the ethical world of British MPs in which they were asked questions pertaining to constituency service while conflict of interest. Computing a tolerance score for constituency service and conflict of interest of the participating MPs. By combining the two dimensions from the results, a typology was formed in which Puritans have low tolerance on both dimensions, Servants have tolerance for constituency service and low tolerance for the conflict of interest, Muddlers have high tolerance for the conflict of interest and low tolerance for constituency service, and the Entrepreneurs have high tolerance on both dimensions. When MPs fall under a different category they disagree on changes to ethics provisions reform possibilities (p.8). One of the most interesting findings, which emerged from the study, is that all British MPs condemn corruption and criminal behavior including condemned activities such as bribery and blatant misappropriation of public funds and but in the more nebulous problematic grey areas of constituency service and conflict of interest it is harder to reach even though these are the areas that MPs are most likely to face personal dilemmas.

The fact that there are quite different ethical standards creates important implications. It proves that there is not a lot of consensus among MPs about what constitutes improper behavior, about the nature of the ethics problems, and about what changes should be made to make the ethics regime work. This also means that to make ethics reforms and ethics regimes work it is vital to promote a common set of civic attitudes and ethical values among MPs.

The question than remains, does this mean that cultural factors and civic attitudes are the main determinants of ethics reforms? As Marshall R. Goodman, Timothy J. Holp and Karen M. Ludwig (1996) show in their study ethics reforms generally respond to media

investigations or falling levels of trust among the public rather than to cultural factors. Nevertheless, cultural conditions are important to make ethics systems work.

Unit 8 Questions

Please answer each of the following questions. If you are taking this course in a group you may then meet to discuss your answers.

1. What is political culture?
2. Why is political culture considered to be so important in the functioning of a political system?
3. Given the importance of (specific forms of) political culture, is it possible to say that political culture may be a determinant of institutional success?
4. Are some political cultures more likely to be conducive to the establishment of ethics regimes?
5. In what ways can political culture influence the functioning of an ethics regime?
6. Why is it so important for the success of an ethics reform that MPs have a uniform political culture?
7. According to Mancuso, do MPs have a uniform political culture?

Select Bibliography

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