Political Culture: Genealogy of a Concept

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A cursory glance at new titles in U.S. political history may give the impression that "all the past is political culture," and that this intuitively sensible formula is "casually invoked" by writers casting about for theoretical support. Admittedly, some users have turned political culture into an elastic category. The *Encyclopedia of American Social History*, for example, expansively claims political culture for both the "new social history" and the "new political history." A recent survey of the Organization of American Historians finds that nine of the top ten "most influential" books can be considered "inquiries into the nature of American political culture," even though none of these classic works ever invoked the concept by name. Political culture might be an example of what Thompson called "a clumpish term, which by gathering so many activities and attributes into one common bundle may actually confuse or disguise discriminations that should be made between them." Absent a clear definition and intellectual genealogy, "political culture" threatens to obscure more than it reveals.1

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Despite this danger, historians should not turn their backs on political culture. Recent works like Etcheson’s *Emerging Midwest* suggest that the concept possesses great analytical utility. Others like Wiebe’s *Self-Rule*, however, underscore the need for more discipline in using it. Beyond casual invocation, historians of political culture would do well to acquaint themselves with the intellectual genealogy of the concept—not least because it teaches a rare lesson in how to make theoretical contributions to other disciplines. Political culture originated as an analytical tool for political scientists using quantitative-behavioralist methods, but historians have so enriched the concept with theories of cultural interpretation that now “one can see grounds for reborrowing by political scientists of the concept originally borrowed from them.” There is nothing new about historians pilfering ideas, but, in this instance, historians are not exporters of a precious theoretical commodity, gaining unaccustomed leverage in the interdisciplinary balance of trade. Furthermore, while political scientists have come to accept that historically derived “cultural beliefs,” not just systemic “variables,” affect political outcomes, historians have established that the intersection of politics and culture was a vital part of the American past.²

The concept of political culture evolved from centuries of generalizing about power’s different faces in different places. Plato’s “dispositions,” Montesquieu’s “spirit of the laws,” Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s “mores,” David Hume’s “manners,” Alexis de Tocqueville’s “habits of the heart,” Emile Durkheim’s “collective consciousness,” and Max Weber’s “authority systems” were all ancestors to the concept. Earlier in this century, American social scientists began asking how the unique “psychological coherence” or “modal personality” of a culture might affect its politics. Laswell’s call for “extend[ing] the scope of political investigation to include the fundamental features of the cultural setting” helped loose a flood of so-called “national character” studies in the 1940s. These works placed whole countries on the couch, linking supposedly essential traits to the resolution of collective psycho-

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dramas. The resulting neo-Freudian interpretations of culture were imaginative and often frivolous, such as the theory of "diaperology" that ascribed Soviet foreign policy to Russian swaddling practices. At best, national character studies lapsed into hereditary determinism; at worst, they reified crude stereotypes. Political scientists concluded from this early misadventure that cultural theory must rely on "observations systematically made and recorded by trained social scientists" armed with the rigorously empirical methods of quantitative behavioralism.\(^3\)

The modern-day concept of political culture was born amid Cold War efforts to distinguish the "Free World" from the rest of the world. In a landmark 1956 essay, Almond contrasted the "pragmatic" politics of Britain and the United States with the "simplism" of totalitarian states. This Manichean dichotomy appealed to postwar political scientists who hoped that comparative theory would help spread the blessings of American democracy and stem the tide of communism. But Almond's research agenda outlasted the Cold War: "Every political system is embedded in a particular pattern of orientations to political action. I have found it useful to refer to this as the political culture." With this single stroke, he offered a convenient catchphrase for such loosely conceptualized terms in comparative politics as attitudes, values, ideology, and socialization. It bore an obvious affinity to Weber's recently translated theory of Protestantism as the cultural engine of modernization. The problem for political scientists was how to

apply Almond's idea—how to identify, measure, and compare the "pattern of orientations" that characterized politics in different nations. The solution came from another field of postwar political science, namely, psephology, or the study of voting behavior.  

Psephologists at the time were busily using the sample-survey methods of opinion pollsters and market researchers to explore "how the voter makes up his mind." Inspired by this work, regarded at the time as methodologically sophisticated, Almond teamed with Verba to survey thousands of citizens in five nations. In *The Civic Culture* (1963), Almond and Verba vowed to develop "a scientific theory of democracy" by "codify[ing] the operating characteristics of the democratic polity itself." In practice, however, they simply measured "attitudes toward the political system" in various places and called the result political culture. The authors made startling discoveries—for example, that 85 percent of Americans expressed pride in their government, compared with 7 percent of Germans and 3 percent of Italians. But critics questioned the "psychologically reductionistic" use of poll data to sum up individual attitudes, given that culture was a group phenomenon, protesting that "political culture [was] the property of a collectivity." "Individuals have beliefs, values, and attitudes, but they do not have cultures." Evidently, there was a difference between answering questionnaires, which reflected diffuse opinions, and constituting a polity, which reflects historical evolution, intersubjective understanding, and collectively negotiated (and contested) meanings.  


Almond and Verba had completely omitted history and politics from their construction of political culture. They presumed that polls measure timeless cultural attributes; instead, they may simply record ephemeral opinions about a particular regime at a particular time. Almond and Verba seemed to imply that political culture never changed and never varied internally. Marxists objected that *The Civic Culture* ignored class and power relations, and many detractors raised the red flag of normative bias: Almond and Verba seemed to idealize the “moderate” civic culture of Anglo-American liberal democracy that other benighted countries lacked.6

The worst flaw in the original political culture concept was its chicken–egg conundrum of cause and effect: Did civic culture create democracy—or did democracy create civic culture? As an explanatory model, political culture seemed tautological; structure rather than culture could well account for democratic success, rendering the civic culture just another dependent variable. Potter had earlier suggested an alternative explanation that American democracy was rooted not in civic culture but in economic “abundance.” Almond later showed signs of agreeing with him.7

Before long, Verba admitted to having written “a bold and incautious book.” He redefined political culture as “beliefs, expressive symbols, and values” that required interpretation as well as measurement. He tried to be more specific about “what aspects...
of political culture are determinants of what phenomena,” repositioning the concept as the “link between the events of politics and the behavior of individuals.” Verba allowed for cultural changes that could shape or be shaped by politics, for class-specific versions of a culture, and for subcultures within a polity. In a volume dedicated to Almond, he offered his “broad and rather loose definition” to answer their critics, and Pye, his new collaborator, soon followed with a similarly inclusive definition that stretched political culture from “the collective history of a political system” to “the life histories of the members of that system,” creating a link between “public events and private experiences.” Thus, the political culture concept acquired its “kitchen sink” reputation, eliciting criticism that it described everything about politics “without explaining anything” and turned “abstract idealizations” into uncaused causes. Dissatisfied political scientists implored their colleagues to “stop using political culture as a handy residual variable to explain phenomena we cannot think of other ways to deal with.”

Political culture’s wash-out left comparative politics in what Wiarda called “a state of crisis,” woefully lacking “a single global and integrating theoretical framework.” According to Laitin, “The systematic study of politics and culture [was] moribund.”

The underappreciated concept emerged again in another branch of the political-science family, the study of American government. Patterson suggested treating regions of the United States as mini-nations with distinct political cultures, and Elazar soon emerged as the leader of this project. For him, political


culture comprised the “habits, perspectives, and attitudes that exist to influence political life”; regional variations in political forms resulted directly from “differences in political culture among the states.” Elazar theorized that the arrival and spread of Euro-American civilization across the United States from east to west left a residual pattern. He isolated and identified the “moralistic” culture of New England, the “individualistic” culture of the Mid-Atlantic region, and the “traditionalistic” culture of the South. These Ur-cultures migrated to the “continuing frontier” of the West, then to the cities, and finally to the suburbs. Elazar applied “cultural geology” to the sediments of human society that these migration streams left behind, devising intricate maps of each culture’s national diffusion.¹⁰

Few political scientists found Elazar’s “American mosaic” completely persuasive. Some rejected his triangular typology in favor of a continuum, but none could agree on which two cultures were polar opposites. Some disputed Elazar’s terms because his categories entailed a type of belief (individualism), a manner of belief (traditionalism), and a source of belief (moralism), which made them incommensurable. Elazar devoted considerable effort to refine these cultural constructs, never backing down from what he considered “the soundness of [his] original thesis.” Eventually, he inflated it into a grand theory of “the actual way in which the art of government is practiced” throughout the United States, even insisting that political culture, “an independent variable with a dynamic of its own,” had caused the Civil War.¹¹

Stirred by such extravagant claims, swarms of doubting scholars tested Elazar’s cultural constructs against such quantitative state-level variables as voter turnout, tax rates, per capita spending, quality of life, and poll data of all kinds. The results proved


inconclusive. "For every study that claims to have found Elazar's theory vindicated," one survey of this literature observed, "there is another that claims to find it of little use."\[^{12}\]

After a much-heralded birth, the political culture concept had mutated into an awkward and unloved scion of political science. "Doubts about the approach no doubt arose from its too-quick popularity, its rapidly acquired faddishness," reasoned Eckstein, and a recent textbook stated, "Rarely has a concept been so frequently used and so often contended." Most users had to refashion the notion to suit themselves—either employing survey data to suggest changes in political culture between generations, thereby sidestepping questions of causality or attitudinal attribution, or whittling down the concept into a humble "heuristic device" merely to set boundaries for political outcomes. At best, culture influenced "preferences" by demarcating the range of conceivable alternatives without choosing among them. Too often, however, "political culture" served as an academic token or a bland cliché. For example, Elazar's friends and foes alike could hardly have disagreed that, in the name of political culture, "the political attitudes of U.S. citizens vary in important ways on the basis of where in the United States they live." With this sort of commonplace wisdom, political culture betrayed its early promise as the "scientific theory of democracy."\[^{13}\]

After political scientists abandoned the political culture concept, historians gave it a new home. Political scientists had tried to


observe, dissect, classify, and quantify culture, but U.S. historians absorbed a more holistic view of it from postwar anthropologists. Beyond arts and literature, culture came to encompass the “complex whole” of social organization—spiritual belief, political institution, traditional practice, ethical value, psychological assumption, folkloric custom, popular entertainment, gender roles, material artifacts, and myriad other kaleidoscopic concerns. Indeed, anthropologists argued among themselves about the “conceptual slovenliness” that plagued their “inordinately swollen” construct. Most, however, accepted that the broader definition of culture was “a source of illumination, not a veil of obscurity.” As Berkhofer pointed out, both the postwar American Studies movement and what later drew scorn as “consensus” history resulted from similar efforts to trace “manifestations of behavior” to cultural “ideas and values” in anthropological fashion.14

The temptation to quantify culture seduced relatively few historians, because their subjects, being for the most part dead, could not fill out questionnaires. Instead, historians immersed themselves in texts and applied (or misapplied) anthropological theory as best they could. Many became devotees of Geertz, whose ethnographic method of “thick description” sought to inscribe words and deeds with phenomenological and contextual meaning. Thick description entranced those who already believed with Skinner that “the explanation of human action must always include—and perhaps even take the form of—an attempt to recover and interpret the meanings of social actions from the point of view of the agents performing them.” In a Weberian para-

phrase, Geertz postulated that “man is an animal suspended in
webs of significance he himself has spun,” thus declaring that the
study of *homo signifians* required impressionistic interpretation, not
scientific measurement. Focusing on the intersubjective aspects of
public acts, thick description became a technique of *cultural
semiotics*, or the contextual interpretation of cultural symbols. With
it, historians would breathe new life into the political culture
concept. Historiographical surveys of Geertz’s influence tend to
focus on European cultural historians, but his impact on American
political historians was no less impressive.  

On the surface, cultural semiotics seemed incompatible with
history because it ignored the origin and evolution of cultural
symbols. As Biersack put it, in cultural semiotics, “Meaning is
described, never derived.” European historians inclined toward
Foucault’s style of locating symbols (or “representations”) in his-
tory rather than Geertz’s penchant for ahistorical description. But
many political historians in the United States embraced cultural
semiotics in the 1970s because it promised to liberate them from
the theoretical legacies of materialism, behavioralism, and idealism,
which had paralyzed the study of ideology. For decades, materialist
historians had treated ideology as a rationalization of material
interest or an outright obfuscation; behavioralists had treated it as
idiosyncratic, hopelessly subjective, and irrelevant; and idealists
had treated it as disembodied “thought” with a life of its own, at
least until the “linguistic turn” enshrined a less transcendental view
of abstract discourse. Many political historians agreed with Hartz
that the materialist–idealist schism distorted ideology’s role in
history by rendering ideas either epiphenomenal or overly deter-
ministic. Many also agreed with such linguistic philosophers as

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15 Some anthropologists take a dim view of these efforts; some historians concur. See the symposium, “History and Anthropology: A Dialogue,” *Historical Methods, XIX* (1986), 119–
128; Jean-Christophe Agnew, “History and Anthropology: Scenes from a Marriage,” *Yale Journal of Criticism*, III (1990), 29–50; Nicholas B. Dirks, “Is Vice Versa? Historical Anthro-
Austin that behavioralism either ignored the possibility of “doing things with words” or oversimplified human behavior by dismissing intentionality.\textsuperscript{16}

Geertz deftly fused ideas, interests, and behavior by treating ideology as a socially constructed “cultural system.” Ideology, in his view, affected how people perceived and acted on their material interests; it also shaped political ideas with unspoken assumptions that guided behavior. Geertz stressed that ideology was the overall context of “events, behaviors, institutions, or processes,” rather than the cause (as idealists assumed) or the effect (as materialists and behavioralists assumed) of social phenomena—including politics. The cultural context of politics encompassed perception of interest, intention for behavior, and assumption behind idea. It inscribed the words and deeds of participants with culturally symbolic meanings that analysts endeavored to decipher. Of course, historians had to keep in mind “that symbols convey multiple meanings and that meaning is construed in different ways by different people,” as Darnton cautioned aspiring Geertzians. But the discovery of cultural semiotics helped American historians cultivate a renewed appreciation for the symbolic forms of politics—discourse and practice, voting and speaking, campaigning and governing. Political words and deeds became symbolic texts susceptible to interpretation for meanings intended by communicators, constructed by audiences, and (though Geertz was weak on this point) contested by subaltern groups.\textsuperscript{17}


Cultural semiotics allowed historians to describe political ideology without transmuting it into idealist “thought,” exaggerating it into “hegemony,” or reducing it to “false consciousness.” When assessed symbolically, politics became as much a part of culture as gender or religion—social constructions that historians routinely subjected to symbolic interpretations. This approach appealed to political historians who recognized that elitist biographies were passé, but whom its successor, the “new political history,” failed to satisfy. As confirmed behavioralists, the new political historians downplayed “rhetoric” as deceptive, meaningless, and anecdotal. Instead, they correlated voting and census data to build determinist models of political action based on “ethnocultural” loyalty. These historians stripped objective behavior from subjective context, treating voters in poll booths like laboratory rats in mazes; with a wave of the slide rule, they dismissed ideology as irrelevant to “how democracy works.” Cultural semiotics attracted instead those historians of politics who agreed that old-fashioned approaches merely skimmed the surface, but who rejected both the old Marxian-materialist and the new ethnocultural-behavioralist alternatives. Surely there was more to politics than class conflict and correlation coefficients. Armed with Geertz’s expansive definition of ideology, which shifted his historical attention to the symbolic content of campaign rallies, platform oratory, and political tracts, historians could redeem political culture while doing useful work.18

“One of the things that everyone knows but no one can quite think how to demonstrate,” Geertz pondered, “is that a country’s politics reflect the design of its culture.” With Geertz’s help, historians cut this Gordian knot by replacing the “behavioral orthodoxy” of political science with the classic anthropological

theory of culture as unarticulated consciousness—what Kluckhohn, in 1943, had called “covert culture,” which operates through “unstated premises” rather than measurable attitudes. Kluckhohn defined culture as the collection of “premises and categories whose influence is greater, rather than less, because they are seldom put into words.”

Tracking down the unspoken assumptions of past politics was not a new quest. As early as the 1940s, long before the discovery of cultural semiotics, ambitious U.S. historians were forging grand syntheses of ideology into cultural systems. For their pains, many of these writers were branded as “consensus” celebrators, even though their intent was not always celebratory. Others showed sensitivity to political symbols in the ideology of colonial Virginians, early national politicians, the followers of Andrew Jackson, and the founders of the Republican party. These early works anticipated the political culture synthesis, but the watershed in historical application of the political culture concept was the discovery of republicanism as the ideology that shaped colonial American perceptions of British rule in the imperial crisis of the eighteenth century.

For generations, historians had argued about the validity, and even the sincerity, of complaints against British rule leading up to the Revolution. It seemed incongruous that a tax increase could have provoked a general rebellion against king and country. The reinterpretation of revolutionary discourse in light of republican symbols and meanings helped historians to see George III’s “long


train of abuses” from the patriots’ perspective as a monstrous conspiracy against liberty and a harbinger of corruption. Bailyn and his students drew on cultural semiotics to stress that revolutionary leaders and a great many followers perceived British policy as “a deliberate assault launched surreptitiously by plotters against liberty.” Through the republican lens, American rebels “saw behind the actions of the English ministry . . . not merely misgovernment . . . but a deliberate design to destroy the constitutional safeguards of liberty, which only concerted resistance—violent resistance if necessary—could effectively oppose.” Intellectual historians also helped articulate republicanism to recapture the meaning of symbol-laden words like tyranny, corruption, liberty, and virtue in their original setting and to reinterpret the Revolution from the revolutionaries’ point of view.21

Predictably, materialist historians denounced the republicanism thesis as “ideological determinism.” Failing to appreciate the subtlety of political culture as a perceptual context and a semiological system, not a cause, these critics mistook republicanism for a “consensus” theory that attributed the Revolution to the writings of “Great White Men.” Undaunted, Bailyn’s students kept spreading the gospel of political culture, urging colleagues to recognize that public expressions of political ideas “meant something very real to both the writers and their readers,” and that revolutionary rhetoric deserved renewed attention for evidence of forgotten meanings. Bailyn himself nominated Geertz as a potential mediator for political historians divided between materialism, behavioralism, and idealism. “Formal discourse becomes politically powerful when it becomes ideology,” he asserted—that is, when


it “shapes what is otherwise instinctive and directs it to attainable goals; when it clarifies, symbolizes, and elevates to structured consciousness the mingled urges that stir within us.” Wood, Bailyn’s student, likewise echoed Geertz in affirming that the “meanings” people gave to their political actions were “never epiphenomenal” and that “all human behavior can only be understood and explained, indeed can only exist, in terms of the meanings it has.”

Republicanism advanced the cause of political culture with historians, but family quarrels about the relationships between republicanism, liberalism, and labor radicalism still had to be settled. Accusatory footnotes abounded, as historians sought to prove the predominance of increasingly abstract viewpoints. Taylor complained that the republicanism debate seemed to “describe categories that were, at best, dimly apprehended by people in the past,” a sadly ironic outcome for political culture’s historiographical debut, given that the concept was supposed to reinfuse past perspectives into the study of past politics.

If nothing else, the debate proved that historians, unlike political scientists, would not demand scientific rigor from their adopted concept. Historians refrained from flinging statistics at each other. Despite its flaws and controversies, the republicanism thesis successfully grafted cultural semiotics onto American political history. As Silbey put it, at least historians of republicanism tried to describe “things that link a people together politically, their shared values, memories, and perspectives” within a holistic framework, and Rogers, in an otherwise critical review, cited


republicanism's "investment of language and culture with coherence and social power."²⁴

Answering the "consensus" canard, political culture historians began to refocus the concept from the nation to specific groups. Holt and Greenberg described the advent of the Civil War from the perspective of Northern and Southern politicians—both sides viewing themselves as defenders of republican virtue. Howe analyzed the partisan political culture of antebellum Whigs, declaring à la Geertz that "the mood, metaphors, values, and style of Whig political attitudes mattered." Howe profiled prominent politicians, not because they were "Great White Men," but because they were useful informants who "would reveal the fullest development and elaboration of Whig culture." Baker conferred comparable attention on Democrats in the antebellum North, drawing upon anthropological theory to describe partisan "tribal rites." Like Howe, Baker relied on prominent "informants," but her methodological breakthrough was to treat "voting as a symbolic demonstration," the American equivalent of Geertz's famous Balinese cockfight that is, the essential ritual of a culture. At a time when other political historians poured over election returns and census manuscripts, Baker set her sights on "metaphorical language and political iconography," asking "what voting meant in a collective sense," rather than piling up more decontextualized statistics.²⁵

Soon a great many U.S. historians adopted the political culture concept as their own. Reviewers found the approach "stunning in its originality," for it "include[d] everyone who participated in politics," turning historians into mass mind readers. Political culture captured "popular beliefs and expectations that gave meaning to the political process and guided the conduct of


politics and government.” With this concept, historians could recover the “manners,” “intellectual atmosphere,” and “perceptions” of past political figures, though temporal change did not enter into their analyses until Watson chose the transition from the first to the second party system to link economic development to shifts in antebellum political culture. In the process, he demonstrated that the retrieval of submerged patterns of belief need not entail any presumptions of immutability. Formisano examined the same transition more thoroughly, describing how genteel “electioneering” gave way to rough-and-tumble “campaigning” in Massachusetts. He unearthed “the taken-for-granted” of political discourse by combining sources about “community life” with statistical analysis—but without inferring ideas from behavior.26

In the 1990s, Ethington’s account of San Francisco’s shift from “republican liberalism” to “pluralist liberalism” and Bond’s tracking of white Mississippi’s “social ethic” have added sophisticated diachronic analysis to political culture history. In this spirit, Wiebe’s Self-Rule offers a sweeping narrative of the transition from active, high-turnout democracy in the nineteenth-century United States to passive, low-turnout democracy in the twentieth century. Women and non-whites were proscribed from politics, Wiebe freely admits, but for the white-male masses, the nineteenth century was a democratic golden age of “self-determination” when “people ruled themselves” both individually and collectively.27

This edenic era ended with the urban-industrial transformation that brought “centralization and hierarchy.” In the early twentieth century, a new “national class” of reformers, businessmen, and intellectuals wielded scientific expertise to isolate po-


itical power from the masses. Wiebe charges the progressive movement with the crime of “atomizing the electorate”—forcing voters to abandon partisan identities in order to cast their ballots as “an individualized private act.” No longer did elections function as fraternal celebrations of shared identity. After 1920, faced with the necessity of “absorbing increasing amounts of information on a multiplying array of issues,” fewer and fewer Americans straggled to the polls, and voter turnout fell from over 80 percent in the 1880s to barely 50 percent a century later.28

Wiebe tells a familiar story with two new twists. First, whereas some historians argue that the “decline of popular politics” was an unintended consequence of reform, Wiebe is less charitable. “If most progressives did not set out to keep the poor from the polls,” he writes with scorn, “they had little invested in bringing them there.” Elitist reformers “tolerated lower-class exclusion” if they did not actively seek it. In this respect, Self-Rule is a sequel to Wiebe’s acclaimed classic, The Search for Order, 1877–1920, because it extends to the present his saga of centralized bureaucracy displacing popular self-government. In both works, however, Wiebe seems to romanticize blind party loyalty, bossism, and corrupt political machines because they, at least, yielded high turnouts. He might have devoted more attention to the difference between genuine “self-rule” and its illusion under boss rule, or to the democratic potential of the rational, non-partisan, issue-oriented politics that progressives hoped to create. But Wiebe doubts that voters need to know much about issues: “Even if we accept the implausible proposition that a determinate body of knowledge lies out there to be learned,” he writes, “why should citizens be obliged to sit there and learn it?” Given this attitude, it is not surprising that Wiebe finds nineteenth-century elections, which Henry George called “glittering displays of partisanship,” more compelling than the bland information-overload of modern campaigns.29

The second new twist to Wiebe’s “cultural history of American democracy” is his pointed invocation of “culture.” Sounding like a comparative politics scholar in the Almond–Verba tradition, Wiebe defines democracy as “invariably popular self-government and variably something else—something culturally specific that has adhered to it.” Sounding like a Geertzian ethnographer, he wants to explore “the webbing of values and relations” spun within American democracy. Seemingly a culturalist, not a behavioralist, Wiebe declares that “my study is situated at the intersection between beliefs and actions,” steering between “a systematic history of ideas on one side and a detailed history of political behavior on the other.” Yet, except for brief forays into exposing sundry political theorists as closeted anti-democrats, Wiebe does not engage the rhetorical conventions, unspoken assumptions, and significant symbols of past politics as would a true student of cultural semiotics. Although *Self-Rule* is a powerfully argued brief for democratic revitalization, its invocation of political culture terminology seems gratuitous. Despite claims to the contrary, Wiebe’s real concern is behavioralist, not culturalist: voter turnout, not the meanings and discourse of politics, is for him the measure of democracy. “At some point on a curve of declining turnouts,” he writes, “the system no longer functions.” Indeed, he dismisses Almond and Verba’s theory of political culture precisely because it ignores issues of voting behavior and turnout.30

Other historians combining chronological narratives with cultural comparisons have applied the political culture concept to symbols and ideology rather than to functions and behaviors. This approach seems to hold the most promise for scholarly exploration of political culture. Two decades ago, Kelley helped point the way by retracing the transmigration of social groups between the Jeffersonian/Democratic and Whig/Republican party coalitions. Freeman later offered a more ideologically oriented comparison of the styles, traditions, and worldviews of the two major parties. More recently, Baker, Sklar, and McCurry have produced major studies of women’s political culture in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century United States, emphasizing that the franchise was not a necessary precondition to public political participation and comparing the gendered assumptions that men and women

brought to the political arena. These authors imply that the modern welfare state gradually replaced the older laissez-faire state at least partly because male political culture lost its monopoly on formal power. Now that historians have placed political elites in context alongside diverse masses of cultural contestants, no longer can political culture history be said to dwell exclusively on “Great White Men.”

Whether inspired by Elazar’s work in political science, or by Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis, American historians have also begun to connect migration patterns with geographical variations in political culture. Etcheson’s *Emerging Midwest* compares the ideologies of southern and northern migrants in antebellum Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois. Following the trend toward integration of both comparative and diachronic analysis, Etcheson discusses how the events leading to the Civil War sundered state-level polities already divided between two regnant political cultures. Shared ideologies of republicanism, partisanship, and “westernness” could not withstand the resurgence of sectional loyalties in the 1850s. Like Bond, who reconstructed the meaning of “liberty” and “virtue” for white Mississippians, and Greenberg, who likened the interpretation of political culture to “a work of translation,” Etcheson shows a keen sensitivity to language, closely reading the key terms “private interest” and “public good” in context. She adds that historians need not dwell on whether political rhetoric was ever sincere, because, in any case, its users were “aware of public sensibilities and community values.” In a democracy, since successful candidates “win office by appealing

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to assumptions shared with the electorate,” historians can “depend on politicians to be articulate voices of the political culture,” regardless of ulterior motives. With these words, Howe and Baker’s pioneering reliance on prominent informants in the study of political culture now stands vindicated.

These impressive new contributions to American historiography bring political culture to fruition. Yet, not every historian is satisfied. For example, Lotchin allows that “political culture seems to be about ideas,” but he objects that the concept “fails to link specific political outcomes to specific attitudes,” fretting that “without outcomes we cannot fully understand politics.”

Perhaps the problem is that American historians are offering ever-thicker descriptions of politics by invoking the term, “political culture,” without adequate definition or focus. Sometimes it seems to denote not political symbols in context but minute procedural dissections of nominations, campaigns, patronage, and officeholding. Other times, it seems to encompass “common assumptions” about everything from “the legitimacy of the political process in general” to “the role of government in particular.” Eager proponents have used the concept to investigate diverse matters, ranging from antebellum literary metaphors and the origins of New Deal liberalism to abolitionist fairs and George Washington’s personality cult. Like political scientists before them, incautious historians are somewhat in danger of turning political culture into an indiscriminate uncaused cause once again.


Certain of political culture's early champions have recanted. "The need for conceptual clarity is not mere semantics," wrote Formisano, and Baker complained that, too often, "political culture serves as gloss." The concept appears least promising to those whose explanatory frameworks privilege class conflict and objective conditions over ideology and subjective beliefs. Historians who prefer "political economy" to political culture, and who are more likely to invoke Antonio Gramsci than Geertz when they write about ideology, often accuse political culture historians of constructing static, univocal models, although they do not necessarily hesitate to construct their own in the name of "hegemony."35

The concept has failed to bring about a paradigm shift because it has not been able to subsume the conflicts between materialism, behavioralism, and idealism. Nonetheless, political culture's anticipation of the burgeoning "public sphere" literature, in its focus on publicly negotiated meanings, suggests its continued relevance. Public-sphere participants couch their arguments in symbols that are amenable to interpretation by historians who would have their Habermas with a grain of Geertz. Political culture also has a place in the larger movement toward cultural history that Kelley describes as a "phenomenological critique" of behavioralism.36


Political culture, as construed in both political science and history, underscores "the importance of values, feelings, and beliefs in the explanation of political behavior." Just as the concept drew political scientists like Rosenbaum into "the underlying psychological forces that shape much of civic life," it drew historians like Howe into the "political psychology" of past politics. Verba went looking not for "what is happening in the world of politics, but [for] what people believe about those happenings," and he recruited historians as well as political scientists in his quest. No longer must political scientists assume that "culture does not exist or is not important"; nor must political historians conjure up "ethnocultures" from mute statistics of behavior. The charge that the political culture concept tends toward imprecision is not without merit. Yet, despite its analytical expansiveness, the concept represents a valuable check on the assumption that political scientists and historians are "objective" observers.

One controversial trait has haunted the concept since its political-science origins. "The study of political culture," observed Dittmer, "has since its beginnings been in the vanguard of the behavioral revolution in political science." Once Almond and Verba introduced statistical tables into political culture studies, everyone followed suit. Ironically, Almond ended up renouncing the "behavioral revolution," and Verba warned that a ballot was "a rather blunt instrument" for reconstructing a voter's mentality. But most of their followers continued reducing politics to quantifiable variables. It remained for interpretivist historians to go where behavioralists in both disciplines feared to tread, combining cultural semiotics with textual sources.


Gradually the news filtered back to political scientists that historians had done well by political culture. Adams excitedly informed his colleagues that "the non-scientific practitioners of interpretation have something to say to political scientists about the task of understanding the place and production of meaning in politics." He pleaded for cultural semiotics in the study of political culture: "Political meaning is born not just in what individual subjects consciously think and value politically, but in cultural and intersubjective symbols, in collective meanings inscribed in the symbolic texts of political practices themselves." Though no fan of Geertz, Merelman agreed that "if political scientists are to continue to talk about 'political culture' . . . they should attend to contemporary anthropology."³⁹

In the 1990s, political scientists, like historians, have begun to look beyond quantitative behavioralism to cultural semiotics. Brint urges his colleagues to seek "meaning" in politics revealed not by polls but by "the social and discursive practices of a culture." They should learn "the cultural grammar or narrative of a polity—the internal coherence of its social, cultural, and discursive practices." Elkins echoes historians by defining political culture as "a framework for action rather than a set of specific actions or beliefs. It consists of largely unspoken assumptions about the world so 'taken for granted' most of the time that they have become 'second nature.'" Learning "cultural grammar" and "unspoken assumptions" requires textual interpretation informed by anthropological theory rather than sample surveys or correlation coefficients.⁴⁰

Some political scientists prefer Mary Douglas to Geertz as their anthropologist of choice, but their interpretations of political

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action are couched in language that participants would have difficulty understanding. Other political scientists follow historians in adopting Geertz's less structuralist approach precisely because of its intelligibility. From this camp, Laitin counsels that "historical (contextual) analysis," combined with a "richer notion of culture, one built upon the Geertzian framework," is the key to political culture research.\footnote{Laitin, "The Civic Culture at 30," \textit{American Political Science Review}, LXXXIX (1995), 171–173. For Douglas followers, see M. Thompson, Ellis, and Wildavsky, \textit{Cultural Theory}; Ellis, \textit{American Political Cultures}; and Dennis J. Coyle and Ellis, \textit{Politics, Policy, and Culture} (Boulder, 1994). For Geertz followers, see Dittmer, "Political Culture and Political Symbolism"; Adams, "Politics and the Archaeology of Meaning"; and Paul Nesbitt-Larking, "Methodological Notes on the Study of Political Culture," \textit{Political Psychology}, XIII (1992), 79–92.}

A recent survey of the field by Welch, a British political scientist, notes approvingly that "political culture as used and developed within American historiography has begun to fulfill some of the promise of a phenomenological approach." Welch appreciates historians because "a researcher investigating the past with the tool of political culture is much less constrained than one investigating it with a view to justifying this or that theory of comparative politics." The problem, he realizes, is that "the empirical bounty offered by the attitude survey has encouraged behavioral political scientists to imagine they have the fullest conception of political culture, and has distracted them from the more fertile modes of inquiry to which historians have perforce been led." Welch admires how American historians escaped "the necessity of choosing between interests and culture as explanations, instead using political culture to transcend that dichotomy." No longer need students of politics argue about the relative weight of ideas, interests, and behavior; political culture is the context of politics itself—the structure of meaning through which political participants develop ideas, perceive interests, and act on both. Political culture, as applied by historians, provides "a means of connecting the analyst's thick description with the self-understandings of the participants," and this connection is what comparative politics has always lacked.\footnote{Welch, \textit{The Concept of Political Culture}, 13, 148, 157–158. See also Richard W. Wilson, \textit{Compliance Ideologies: Rethinking Political Culture} (New York, 1992); David Brian Robertson, "Politics and the Past: History, Behavioralism, and the Return to Institutionalism in American Political Science," in Eric H. Monkkonen (ed.), \textit{Engaging the Past: The Uses of History Across the Social Sciences} (Durham, 1994).}
When political culture was still in its conceptual infancy within political science, Hitchner argued that it should be nourished with historical analysis, not survey data. Political culture offered great analytical potential, but if the “methodological inclination” to rely solely on supposedly “scientific” data persisted, “we are headed for some trouble.” Hitchner wanted his colleagues to become historians of the political cultures that they studied. He believed that “to discard the ever important dimension of history is truly to cut us adrift from reality. There is a wisdom in our past to which we must always listen.” Historians, not political scientists, turned out to be the better listeners. Indeed, many political scientists using the political culture concept still rely on poll data, but, among historians, cultural (or “public sphere”) approaches are gradually supplanting quantitative behavioralism. “We have not begun to understand our political history sufficiently,” Levine recently admonished, “because we too frequently artificially separated it from the larger cultural context of which it was a part.” Perhaps that artificial separation has ended. “Historiographically,” acknowledges Silbey, a prominent behavioralist, “we live in an age of political culture.”