

Lecture One: *Political Culture*

Introduction

Political culture is culture in its political aspect. It emphasises those patterns of thought and behaviour associated with politics in different societies, ones that are widely shared and define the relationship of citizens to their government and to each other in matters affecting politics and public affairs. Citizens of any country or major ethnic or religious community tend to have a common or core political culture, a set of longterm ideas and traditions which are passed on from one generation to the next.

The process by which people acquire their central tenets and values, and gain knowledge about politics, is known as **political socialisation**. It derives from learning and social experience, and is strongly influenced by people with whom individuals have contact from early childhood through to adulthood. Political socialisation ensures that important values are passed on from one generation to the next and that the latest influx of immigrants comprehend, accept and approve the existing political system, and the procedures and institutions through which it operates. Political socialisation is for this reason overwhelmingly conservative in its effects, having a tendency to ensure that people conserve the best of the past.

In any society, the political culture will have several strands which are only partially compatible. Different elements of the public draw more or less strongly from these several strands. Because of this, **public opinion** will vary on and across the issues of the day. Public opinion is the distribution of citizen opinion on matters of public concern or interest. As Heywood explains, ‘political culture differs from public opinion in that it is fashioned out of long-term values rather than simply people’s reactions to specific policies and problems’.

Political culture in Britain

Political unity, stability and a tradition of independence have long been

regarded as characteristics of the British political system. So too has consensus – the preference for agreement, cooperation and moderation. The majority of British people have long preferred cooperation to confrontation and party politicians, once in office, have acknowledged this and for much of the time avoided confrontationalism. Britain has a long history of independent existence as a more or less united nation. It has a strong commitment to democracy, with its representative institutions of government, based on regular and free elections, in addition to strong liberal values about individual rights and responsibilities. It was the first parliamentary democracy in Europe, so that many of the other countries modeled their institutions, party system and methods on the British experience. In particular, the Westminster model was exported to many of the colonies and territories of the old Empire, when countries became independent.

The British have traditionally preferred to use **parliamentary channels** rather than the anti-parliamentary politics of street demonstrations, direct action and terrorist violence. People generally accept the main institutions of state and the idea that issues should be resolved through the ballot box and not by the bullet and the bomb, even if at various times individuals and groups in parts of Ireland have not subscribed to that preference. People have been willing to place trust in the political elite that rules them, so that social deference (respect for or compliance with the wishes of those in authority) has often been mentioned as a source of British conformity and acquiescence in the status quo.

Continuity is another key element in British political life. It affects not just the hereditary monarchy and House of Lords, which until 1999 had a large hereditary element, but other institutions that also have a long history. Relatively free from upheaval, the British have enjoyed a stable political system, in which the past presses heavily on present practice. **Evolutionary rather than revolutionary change** has been preferred. The British have a preference for pragmatism over ideology and doctrine. As the country lacks a written

constitution, ideas and institutions relating to government have evolved over the years, being modified as change becomes desirable or necessary.

Political culture in the USA

Political culture in the USA derives from some of the ideas which inspired the pioneers who made the country and the Founding Fathers who wrote its constitution. It includes faith in democracy and representative government, the ideas of popular sovereignty, limited government, the rule of law, equality, liberty, opportunity, support for the free-market system, freedom of speech and individual rights. But of course, at different stages in history, the existing political culture and the process of political socialization serve some individuals and groups better than others. American political culture is tied up with:

American Dream: The widespread belief that by hard work and individual enterprise even the most poor and lowly Americans can achieve economic success, a better way of life and enhanced social status, in a land of immense opportunity. According to the Dream, there are no insurmountable barriers which prevent Americans from fulfilling their potential, even if many individuals and groups do not do so.

Adversity, a sense of common danger, has also helped to unify Americans. War and the threat of war often serve to bind a nation. In World War Two, Americans of all creeds and backgrounds could recognise the contribution made by people very different from themselves. The same is true of September 2001 and thereafter. The attacks on the World Trade Center, which destroyed the well-known image of the New York skyline and killed nearly 4000 people, had the effect of bringing New Yorkers and their fellow Americans together.

American exceptionalism, the view that American society and culture are exceptional in comparison with other advanced industrial democracies. It was the Frenchman **Alexis de Tocqueville**, who first wrote of ‘American exceptionalism’, back in 1835.⁷ He saw the United States as ‘a society uniquely different from the more traditional societies and status-bound nations of the Old

World'. It was 'qualitively different in its organizing principles and political and religious institutions from . . . other western societies', some of its distinguishing features being a relatively high level of social egalitarianism and social mobility, enthusiasm for religion, love of country, and ethnic and racial diversity.

A number of shared interests and concerns such as:

A recognition of the dignity and worth of the individual and a tendency to view politics in individualistic terms. Americans have great faith in **the common sense of the average citizen** and believe that all individuals have rights as well as responsibilities. Everyone should have the chance to fulfill their destiny, and no individual or group should be denied recognition of their worth or dignity.

Equality: There has always been a strong belief in social equality, and although there are sharp inequalities of income and wealth, the divisions are not associated with a class system as they have been in Britain. The equality Americans favour is not equality of outcome, but rather of worth. They do believe that every American is entitled to equal consideration, equal protection under the law and equal rights. Equality is more about prospects of advancement than about result. No one should be limited by his or her social background, ethnicity, gender or religion.

Democracy: A belief in government by the people, according to majority will. In a representative democracy, Americans could select representatives to govern and lay down the rules by which society operates. For the Founding Fathers, 'republic' seemed preferable to 'democracy', with its overtones of demagoguery, mass rule and the mob. Such fears have long disappeared and there has throughout much American history been a strong consensus in support of democracy and the values that underpin it, including:

- **A deep interest in the exercise of power**, who has it, how it was acquired and how those who exercise it can be removed.
- **A general acceptance of majority rule**, Pluralism in society, involving the existence and acceptance of distinctive groups and political toleration, has been

important as the country has become more ethnically and religiously diverse, and people have adopted new lifestyle arrangements.

A firm commitment to popular sovereignty, the idea that ultimate power resides in the people themselves

- **Strong support for the rule of law**, with government being based upon a body of law applied equally and with just procedures.

A dislike and distrust of government and a fear of the tyrannical rule and exercise of excessive authority that can accompany it.

Political ideas, institutions and values in Britain and the United States: similarities and differences

The most obvious similarity is a common commitment to the democratic process, with overwhelming support for the political institutions of either country and a wide measure of consensus about the framework in which politics should operate. In the same way, both countries share a common commitment to individual liberty. There is a common commitment to the **rule of law**, majority rule and tolerance for those who disagree, although in the USA such toleration has not always extended to groups on the political Left.

There is also the same preference for gradual political and social change, even if at times there is a sudden move forward in a particular area of policy. There are differences in the political culture, not so much affecting thinking about the preferred form of government but more about some of the values that matter most. In Britain, liberty has rated more highly than equality. Even the Labour Party has now abandoned equality of outcome as an end objective and settled instead for equality of opportunity.

American talk of equality is seen in the attitude of people towards social class. Class barriers and differences of status based upon a class hierarchy are not recognised in American society, as they have traditionally been in Britain.

In the same way, deference may have lost much of its impact in Britain, but it never was a powerful force in the United States, for the whole idea of looking up to and respecting 'social superiors' is anathema.

Partly because of this difference in outlook, there has in the past been a difference of attitude towards government in both countries. In the United States, the distrust of government is much more long-standing, even if the fears about behaviour and motives of politicians are similar. American distrust of those in authority stems partly from their more egalitarian attitudes, but also from a feeling that those who rule may have some worthy motives but are also out to advance their own self-interest and so need to be viewed with suspicion. Americans are more individualistic and wary of state intervention, whereas the British have been more willing to accept the role of government in our national life.

In twentieth-century Britain, the state, on behalf of its citizens, came to acknowledge the collective responsibility of everyone to care about those in need (collectivism). In America, with its individualist ethos and commitment to the American Dream, socialism has never taken root. Nor have the collectivist ideas associated with it, so that policies based on an extension of governmental control have been quickly denounced as 'socialistic'.

They also differ greatly in their international stature. Britain is a once great power, whose influence in the world has waned over the last fifty years. America is a 'Super Power', the leader of the free world and the most powerful nation in the world. Yet the countries are linked by a common language and a number of common ideals and values. The colonial link of the past is an obvious bond and so is the democratic path they have taken. In both cases, there has been continuity of free and representative government, a preference for gradual rather than revolutionary change and a commitment to individual freedom. Theirs' has been a 'special relationship'.