

THE CIVIC CULTURE IN THE UNITED STATES FIFTY YEARS LATER

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- I. *How the United States Has Changed in Fifty Years.*
- II. *The Civic Culture: Some Questions Repeated Fifty Years Later.*
- III. *Political Inequality: A Persistent Characteristic.*

I've been asked to talk about changes in the United States and its political culture over the last fifty years. This is hardly a small topic and hardly a topic that one can easily summarize in a few lines. I want to do a few things in this report. First I want to highlight some of the major changes in U.S. society, politics, and culture in the half century since the Civic Culture study. The world in 1959 was quite a bit different from what it is today. Following that, I want to present recently collected data replicating some of the questions in the Civic Culture to illustrate some of the changes and continuities over the fifty years period. And lastly, I want to present data on one major continuity in the United States; the inequality of political engagement.

To begin with, one of the things that has changed and is relevant to the Civic Culture study is the way in which we study the world. Surveys were just beginning to be used to study politics and society. The Civic Culture study was one of the first multi-nation studies of political attitudes and behaviors. The novelty of the method was matched by the novelty of its focus on political culture across nations. Thus, the study in the United States was of the U.S. political culture in international perspective; an unusual and revealing focus. We use surveys to study society, politics, and culture now much more than we did then. Surveys are conducted all over the world. The surveys are much more sophisticated and become more so each year.

I. HOW THE UNITED STATES HAS CHANGED IN FIFTY YEARS

The changes in the world since 1959 include such obvious things as globalization, the role of technology, the seeming intensification of ethnic and religious conflict (certainly much more central than one assumed it would be fifty years ago), as well as the end of the Cold War and the decline of Communism. More recently is the digital revolution and the role of the Internet. That is also a major change and I want to talk about that.

Let me turn to a few of the general changes in citizen views and citizen behavior in the United States in recent decades. There are data that fewer people participate in the United States, not only in political life but in all kinds of collective activities. The data are somewhat controversial. My colleague Robert Putnam has shown that there are less people engaged in political life; and I think that's quite true.¹ People are less happy about politics and take less part in politics. The numbers go up and down depending upon whether it is an election year and who is running for office; but, in general, that seems to be the case. However, the changes are more complex. In a variety of ways, what we saw back in 1959 does look like what we see today. Some things have not changed. But there have been many changes. And it is significant that what we saw back in 1959 was not the complete story of 1959; the 1959 that framed the Civic Culture study did not contain some of features of the society back then.

Let me mention a few characteristics of civic life in 1959 that were not apparent to us then and, therefore, were not dealt with fully in the Civic Culture. One is the great recognition in the United States, of the heterogeneity of our country. Back in 1959, racial issues had not become major issues on the American agenda. The civil rights movement which began shortly thereafter made quite clear that the United States was at minimum a biracial, country with white people and black people. Because large numbers of the black people were living in the South, where their political participation was suppressed, or living in the North, where they were usually a lot less active than White Americans, they weren't noticed that much. What changed is was the awareness of racial heterogeneity and racial discrimination. Women were thought of back in the 1950's as being outside of politics, they should be home, they were happy at home; that's what men said, No one ever asked the women; and that's usually a characteristic of political, of culture. Culture is what people who study it re-

¹ Putman, Robert D., *Bowling Alone*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 2000.

port it to be. And what they report depends on whom they speak to. Thus, one often gets a view of culture that comes from a small group within the society. And the view of culture that came in the United States was often a white and a male culture.

The other thing that has made a big difference in the United States is the great wave of immigration since 1959 – especially from Latin America, but from all parts of the world. The proportion of the population in the United States that is not native born has grown substantially and they are a major political force. The United States is an immigrant nation, Few if any nations have had the repeated influx the U. S. had in the late 19th century and the early 20th century; and then again more recently. As with earlier immigrant groups, the new immigrants are gradually moving to become an important force in American politics.

One of the many changes that have taken place in *U.S. social science* is that there are now many women and many African-Americans who study American politics and society. What one learns about a country depends in part —perhaps large part— who studies it. Thus, we are more aware of the role of women and of African-Americans. The new immigrant groups also enrich our understanding in the same way. There are many post 1959 immigrants or children of immigrants, Latinos and others, who are studying American politics, They are aware of the heterogeneity to a greater extent than people who were born in the United States. What one learns about a culture depends upon what aspect one studies. Similarly, what we learn from a survey depends on what questions are asked, and, to some extent, what questions one asks depends upon who is doing the survey.

Another thing that's changed in American politics since 1959 is the role of religion. Religion always has, in some sense, had a limited role in American politics. The U.S. Constitution says that we are a secular society with religious freedom. The government cannot favor one religion over another or regulate the exercise of religion. On the other hand, religion always was a major force in American politics. In the 19th century, the biggest and most long term conflict was between Protestant America and Catholic America. The latter were largely of immigrants from Ireland, Italy, Poland and the like; Protestant America included many more earlier immigrants. The year that followed the Civic Culture study represented an interesting water-shed. It was commonly thought that no Catholic could ever become President. John F. Kennedy, a Catholic, ran for President, became President, and the issue of being Catholic or Protestant disappeared from presidential elections. In the last presidential election in 2008, many of the candidates who were vying

to be nominated were either Protestant or Catholic. Very few people could name which was which. The same thing, I believe, has happened with our current President. For many years it was a common view that it would never happen that an African–American would become President. The election of Obama has changed the way most people—not all, but most—look at race in American politics,

Religion and race have become less important in determining who can achieve high office. But in many ways they remain important. In connection with religion, it is no longer a debate among different religions; among Protestants, Catholics, and Jews. It is more a debate between people who are intensely religious and people who are more secular. On issues like abortion, stem–cell research, or gay rights, the divide is not between Catholics and Protestants, the divide is between, committed Catholics and Protestants who go to church regularly and orthodox Jews on the one hand and, on the other hand, the less conservative members of each religion.

II. *THE CIVIC CULTURE*: SOME QUESTIONS REPEATED FIFTY YEARS LATER

In anticipation of this conference, I took the opportunity to replicate some questions from the Civic Culture. I could not replicate the entire Civic Culture study, in part because the United States research community, like research communities all over the world, is running out of money. But I managed to convince a survey outfit to replicate of the basic questions from *The Civic Culture* to give an idea of how some general things have changed.²

One of the questions we asked in *The Civic Culture*, which still makes sense today, was this: “What are you most proud of, of your country?” (Table 1)

² The questions I am citing for 1959 and for 2009 touch on general subjects on which people might be expected to have stable views. But we must keep in mind that expressed attitudes can change and often in a short time in response to current events. In particular, the survey in 2009 was conducted on the cusp of a series of major threats to American complacency, from war in the Middle east to a sagging economy with high unemployment. The 2009 survey was conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates.

Table 1. Pride in Nation

Speaking generally, what are the things about this country that you are most proud of as an american?

Most proud of:	1959	2009
Government, democracy, freedom	90%	61%
Economic system, standard of living, ability to get ahead	23%	2%
American people: honesty, work hard, sense of justice	6%	12%
National standing, world leadership	9%	12%

And you'll notice that a lot of people were very proud. And the first thing they were proud of was American government: democracy, freedom; nine out of ten Americans were proud of the political system. They also were proud of the economic system. Fifty years later, in 2009, people are proud of the government, of democracy, of freedom; but quite as much as they were. Rather than a figure that was close to unanimity, the percentage expressing pride in the political system falls to below two-thirds. Because the questions asked in 2009 were asked right in the middle of the major economic crisis we are having in the United States, that pride in the economic system went down substantially. That is a major change as well.

Another general question we asked was: "What do people owe their country, what are the obligations of the citizen?" We weren't even quite sure what we meant by obligations. We asked it in a general way because we wanted to see what people thought were their obligations. If one looks back, there was a wide range of obligations mentioned. Two were obligations to be a participant: 30 percent mention the obligation to vote, and another 10 percent the general obligation to participate politically. There was also a sense of wanting to be a good citizen by obeying the law, paying taxes, loving one's country and the like. (See Table 2)

Table 2. Obligations

People speak of the obligations which they owe to their country. In your opinion what are the obligations which every man owes his country?

Obligation to participate	1959	2009
Vote	30%	6%
Participate in politics and public affairs	11%	5%
Other obligations		
Obey the law	26%	5%
Love one's country	18%	19%
Pay taxes	18%	12%
Good private life: family, do one's job well	14%	19%
Be virtuous	4%	8%
Defend the country, serve in military	2%	2%

What do we get if we ask fifty years later? This is of great interest to me personally. For fifty years, I have been focusing on the nature of participation. We find that the obligations to participate have gone down, quite substantially. Few find voting or participation more generally to be a civic obligation. Obedience to law and paying one's taxes have gone down as well. On the other hand, loving one's country stayed roughly the same. One interesting change is the increase in the "privatization" of civic obligations. There's a sense in which the public has moved into their private lives; a change in the direction of the belief that to be a good citizen is to be good in one's family and do one's job well.

Here are a few additional general questions we can trace over the 50 years.. One is: "Do you think that the government, that the society, the government is run in such a way that there are some groups that have so much power that the majority of the people is ignored?" In 1959, a third of the people agreed that there are groups who have too much power in the country. Who were they? They were big business, they were politicians, they were the unions. There was this sense at least amongst some people that there were forces out there that were running the country that were taking it away from the majority. The public's answers – the big interests – reflect an old populist sentiment in the United States: opposition to power. Note that the opposition is to three different kinds of power: business, government, and unions. Both left and right in the U.S. oppose the "powers that be". They do, however, locate those powers in different

places. Fifty years later, we see that 81 percent of the people agree that some groups have too much power; a large movement toward distrust of power and the interests and institutions that hold it. Interestingly, big businesses perceived power has gone down a little bit. Politicians are more likely to be perceived as too powerful – a concomitant to the decline in pride in the governmental institutions. Unions are seen as being less powerful. The United States has, for an industrialized democracy, one of the smallest rates of union membership and it has been going down, largely because of governmental policies that have made it more difficult to organize a union and businesses have been fighting unions. This is a reflection, I think, of reality the United States. It is an indication that the public is aware of major changes in U.S. society. Concern about “special interests” has gone up. That can refer to a variety of things. In general, these data underscore a sense that the U.S. is a less democratic political system.

Table 3. Equality of Influence

One sometimes hears that some people or groups have so much influence on the way the government is run that the interests of the majority are ignored. Do you agree or disagree that there are such groups?

	1959	2009
Agree	31%	81%
Big business	19%	13%
Politician	14%	20%
Unions	14%	2%
Special interests	7%	15%
Religions	4%	1%
Ideological groups: conservatives, liberals	3%	3%
Health industry	-	4%
Media	-	3%

Here is another question that focuses on the general issue of the quality of government: “Do you think that the government does in general improve things in this country or make them worse, would we be better off if we had what the government does or better off without the government doing anything?” It applied to national government and local government. In 1959, it looked as if a large majority of the public appreciated what the government was doing, and that applied to national and local government. If one looks

at the data today, one still finds that a majority thinks government improves things; but it certainly has changed a not insignificant amount since then.

Table 4. Does Government Improve Our Lives?

On the whole, do the activities of the national Government tend to improve conditions in this country or would we be better off without them?

	1959	2009
Improve	73%	56%
Better of without	3%	20%

THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT?

Improve	70%	60%
Better off without	4%	24%

This clearly reflects a general rise of anti-government sentiment in many part of society. In recent debates about health care and other governmental programs there is a growing voice saying, in effect: “The government always does things badly; we should have less government.”

A few more general attitudes I was able to ask about in this very short survey. They ask for agreement or disagreement on several issues. (Table 5).

Table 5. Agree or Disagree

Now i’d like to ask you another kind of question.

Here are things that people say and we want to find out how other people feel on these things. I’ll read them one at a time and you just tell me offhand whether you agree or disagree.

The way people vote is the main thing that decides how things are run in this country. Just offhand, do you agree or disagree?

Agree	71%	54%
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A FEW STRONG LEADERS WOULD DO MORE FOR THIS COUNTRY THAN ALL THE LAWS AND TALK.

Agree	41%	57%
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ALL CANDIDATES SOUND GOOD IN THEIR SPEECHES BUT YOU CAN NEVER TELL WHAT THEY WILL DO AFTER THEY ARE ELECTED.

Agree	79%	85%
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In 1959, a majority (75 percent) agreed that the way people vote is what controls governmental policy; the government follows the election returns. In addition, a majority rejected the authoritarian notion “We need more strong leaders than all the laws and talk.” Forty-one percent said that but more (57 percent) rejected it. Even back then, there was a good deal of uneasiness with candidates; they sound good in their speeches, but you never can tell what they’re going to do when they get elected. But answers in 1959 above suggest that there was support for the belief disagreement with that the government is run the way a democratic government ought to be run.

The belief in that idea has declined in the last fifty years. The amount of people who believe that the voting is decides what happens in the United States has gone down from 71 to 54 percent. A larger number now reports that we’d be better off with some strong leaders. And more say that candidates don’t always do what they say they’re going to do. The change is substantial (Table 5).

One last general question following up a concern we had in the Civic Culture study about conflict and tension among political parties: “How would you feel if you’re a Democrat and your child married a Republican and vice versa?” Table 6 shows that this attitude has not changed. Unlike some countries where marrying outside of one’s own political party is like marrying outside of one’s religion, there is, in the U.S., some separation of family ties and political affiliation. The lack of change in the public contrasts with the change in relations across the party elites in the U.S. We are in an era of polarization between the two parties in the U.S. Congress but it is not matched by as sharp a polarization in the public.

III. POLITICAL INEQUALITY: A PERSISTENT CHARACTERISTIC

Lastly, I would like to look back at the Civic Culture data and subsequent data from other studies to consider the role of social class in American politics and inequality in American political life, a subject to which I have been engaged with for the half century since the Civic Culture.³ The ideal of democracy is a system in which the citizenry is ultimately in charge;

³ For works on political equality across nations in which I have been involved, see Almond, Gabriel A., *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1963; Ahmed, Bashiruddin and Bhatt, Anil, *Caste, Race, and Politics: A Comparison of India and the United States*, Beverly Hills, Sage Publications, 1971; Nie, Norman and Kim, Jae-on, *Participation and Political Equality: A Seven Nation Comparison*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1978. (Reprinted by Univer-

those making governmental decisions are basically responsive to the public that is sovereign. An important tenet in that ideal of democracy is the equal consideration of the preferences of all citizens; an ideal expressed in the principle of one person—one vote. No society ever achieves that equality, but the United States is further from it than most developed, industrial democracies. The gap in political activity on the basis of socio-economic status (SES, often measured as a combination of education and income) is substantial and persistent. The United States sometimes gives the appearance of equality. Everybody is an “American”, we are much more informal in the relations of one group to another, one cannot always tell the social class of the person walking on the street near you. Social class was not on the agenda in American politics. And because social class was not explicitly on the agenda, it wasn’t the basis of social organization. That, paradoxically, made social class powerful in determining who becomes active in American politics. The reason was in other countries there was a recognition that there were class differences and organizations were built around such differences; there were strong unions and there was a socialist party. These did not exist in the U.S. In addition, Americans were not class conscious. In the United States most people say that they are middle class. The fact that class was off the agenda made it a more powerful political force.

The Civic Culture data from 1959 give a good indication of the persistence of the stratification of political activity over the half-century span. Figure 1 shows the activity of citizens divided into five equal socio-economic quintiles (based on education and income) at four points of time: 1959 (the Civic Culture data), 1967, 1995, and 2008⁴ – a span of time of fifty years rarely available for systematic comparison. The questions asked

sity of Chicago Press, 1987); and *Elites and the Idea of Equality: A Comparison of Japan, Sweden, and the United States*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1987.

For works on political equality focusing on the United States, see Nie, Norman, *Participation in America: Political Democracy and Social Equality*, New York, Harper and Row, 1972. (Reprinted by University of Chicago Press, 1987); Schlozman, Kay L., *Injury to Insult: Unemployment, Class, and Political Response*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1979; Orren, Gary R., *Equality in America: The View from the Top*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1985; Schlozman, Kay L. and Brady, Henry E., *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Democracy*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1995; Burns, Nancy E. and Schlozman, Kay L., *The Private Roots of Public Life: Gender and the Paradox of Political Inequality*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2001.

⁴ The 1959 data are from the Civic Culture study; 1967 data are the basis of Verba and Nie, *Participation in America*; the 1995 data are the basis for Verba, Schlozman and Brady. The 2008 will be basis for a future book.

in the Civic Culture study are not identical to those asked in the other three studies. But the questions for all three years are measures of political activity. In each year, the figures are the percent active in at least one of the activities in a set of activities about which they were asked. As one can easily see the years are remarkably similar to each other in the upward slope of the lines; indicating that the advantaged in each year are much more active than the disadvantaged. The inequality found in the Civic culture data has remained constant despite the many changes in the political system and the relations of the public to it.

One last point about the persistence of political inequality: one of the major changes in citizen involvement in politics has been the advent of the internet. Some have considered the role of the internet in civic life to be potentially revolutionary – and they may be right in terms of the kinds of activities in which engage and their ability to organize. The internet offers new opportunities to be politically active, to organize such activity across the globe, and will, in all likelihood, change the way politics is run.

I am interested in it from the perspective of equality. How does the existence of the internet affect who is active? Is it a new technology that levels the playing field and can break the pattern of unequal citizen activity? The answer, as shown on Figure 2, is very clear. If anything, the internet makes activity more stratified. The measures on Figure 2 are similar to those in Figure 1; the percentage that are active in at least one of a set of five activities, as measured in a study done in 2008. We built a scale of activities that can be done on-line or off-line. For instance, one can contact a government official using traditional techniques (in person or by phone) or using the new technologies (via e-mail or internet texting). And one can give a contribution off-line or on-line. We show the percentages who are active off-line, on-line, or in either mode. It is clear that inequality remains.

In sum, the Civic Culture study in the United States was a major step toward the systematic study of U.S. political culture, as it was in the other countries studied at that time. It was a pioneering study that told us much about political culture. Some of what it told us has been persistent, and some has changed. Its greatest strength, I believe, is not that it was right. Sometimes it was, sometimes not. The strength of good social science is that it stimulates further study, amplifying and/or correcting what came earlier. That is something the Civic Culture did very well.