
UNIT 1 POLITICAL CULTURE*

Structure

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

Political culture approach has been very popular for conducting comparative studies and making empirical analyses of transitional societies. Scholars of comparative politics have developed this approach using concepts from Sociology and Anthropology. After going through the unit, you should be able to:

- Explain the basic assumptions of political culture approach in comparative politics.
- Explain the meaning and concept of political culture
- Identify different types of political culture with their distinct features, and
- Estimate the value of political culture approach in understanding the dynamics of comparative politics.

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1.1 INTRODUCTION

Political culture remains one of the very important approaches to understand politics in general and comparative politics in particular. This approach has been very popular for conducting comparative studies and making empirical analyses of transitional societies. Scholars have liked to investigate political behaviour and processes of the political systems in the context of their political cultures. In other words, how people view their country's politics can be explored through political culture.

Political culture is a distinctive and spotted form of political philosophy that consists of a set of beliefs, values, norms and assumptions concerning the ways on how governmental, political and economic life is being carried out or ought to be carried out. Political culture, thus, creates a framework for political change and is unique to nations, states and other groups. Thus, in essence, this approach examines a sociological aspect of the subject of political development. It is potentially a powerful, unifying approach to comparative politics.

In general, political culture is referred to as a set of shared views and normative judgments held by a population regarding its political system. Therefore, it is often seen as the foundation of all political activity, or at least as a factor determining the nature, characteristics and level of political activity. It, for that reason, essentially includes historical experience, memory, social communities and individuals in politics, their orientation, skills, influencing the political behaviour and this experience primarily contains a summary, transformed form of impressions and preferences in foreign and domestic policy. It is for this reason that this political culture approach does not refer to the attitudes to specific actors, such as the current president or the prime minister; rather it denotes how people view the political system as a whole, including the belief in its legitimacy. In the sections to follow, an attempt has been made to give you a conceptual understanding of political culture.

1.2 POLITICAL CULTURE APPROACH

A longstanding argument in the literature on comparative politics is that political culture has an important effect on the emergence of political democracy. In part, the focus on political culture, is rather a natural extension of the behavioural revolution in political science and a product of economic modernization. With modernization came changes in values regarding the role of the individual in the political system.

Political culture is a simple concept, but it can easily be misunderstood. The fact that we may characterize a given nation's culture in some way should not lead us to underestimate the importance of diverse subcultures within it. Similarly, the fact that political culture may be an explanatory factor should not lead us to overlook the possibility that objective conditions within a country may be responsible for behaviour often attributed to culture.

We study political culture because it helps us understand political life. For example, why do different ethnic groups cooperate reasonably well in

Switzerland but not in Bosnia or Lebanon? Why are Russians more inclined than Canadians to support an all-powerful political leader? Why has political corruption been a serious and long-standing problem in Mexico but not in Chile? Political culture may provide at least partial answers.

It is extremely difficult to define the term political culture. It is elusive and comprehensive at the same time. In the extant literature in political science, political culture has been defined in many ways but essentially it involves the basic values, ideas, beliefs, attitudes, and orientations about politics. This involves issues of right and wrong, good and bad, what is acceptable in politics and what is not.

To understand the dynamics of political culture, it will be useful to begin with a meaning of the term 'culture'. The term culture has many different meanings and it affects everything people do in their society. Culture is a derivation of the German word "*kultur*". *Kultur* indicates the distinctive higher values of enlightenment of a society. Culture thereby was defined as "the sway of man over nature" (Kroeber, Alfred and Kluckhohn, 1952).

The term 'culture' was first used by Edward B. Taylor, the pioneer English anthropologist in his book, *Primitive Culture* (1871). Taylor used the term culture to refer to a universal human capacity. It is the complex whole that includes knowledge, belief, art, ethics, morals, law, traditions, traits, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. Culture is a powerful human tool for survival, but it is a fragile phenomenon. It is constantly changing and easily lost because it exists only in one's mind.

Culture, thus, represents the shared psychological orientation of the people of society towards societal objects. People of a society acquire and form, more or less, a distinct pattern of orientations towards societal objects. This is, in fact, the culture of the people of the society or the 'Societal Culture', and 'Political Culture' is a distinct part of this societal culture.

The political culture approach can be seen as a natural evolution in the growth of behavioural approach in political analysis in the 1960s. More specifically, the concept was developed to address the need to bridge a growing gap in the behavioural approach between the level of micro-analysis and macro-analysis. It is a set of attitudes and practices held by people that shape their political behaviour includes moral judgment, political myths, beliefs and ideas about what makes up for a good society (A. R. Ball, 1971). It is a reflection of government, but it also incorporates elements of history and tradition that may predict the current regime. Political culture matters because it shapes a population's political perceptions and actions. It is associated with the concept of political ideology, national ethos and spirit, national political psychology, the fundamental values of people etc. For example, the United States and Great Britain have been both democracies, but each has a distinctive political culture. American government derives its power from a written constitution and is dominated by two political parties. In contrast, Britain has a long history of monarchy and has never had a written constitution.

There is a close relationship between political culture and the political system. Political culture is the basis of the survival of all old and modern political systems. A political community, even without having 'state', can exist as a polity or political system. Whatever be the form of a political system – developing or developed, it does possess some form or pattern of political culture. Stateless political systems like the United Nations Organization, many international and regional organizations, more or less, operate on the basis of some form of political culture.

1.2.1 Defining Political Culture

There are several definitions of political culture by different scholars dealing with different perspectives. The *International Encyclopaedia of the Social Science* defines political culture as “the set of attitudes, beliefs and sentiments that give order and meaning to a political process and what provides the underlying assumptions and rules that govern behaviour in the political system.”

Gabriel A Almond and Sidney Verba in 1963 stated that political culture refers specifically to the political orientations and attitudes towards the political system and its various parts, and attitudes towards the role of the self in the system.

Sydney Verba defined political culture as “the system of beliefs about the pattern of political interaction and political institutions” and those beliefs are fundamental, usually unstated, and unchallengeable, assumptions or postulates about politics. He also established a denotative criterion of political culture for subsequent political culture studies by distinguishing it from other specific political psychological constructs such as partisan affiliation and attitudes or beliefs about domestic and international policy issues.

Moreover, Almond and Verba (1963) have identified five important dimensions of political culture namely:

- (a) A sense of national identity
- (b) Attitudes towards one's self as a participant in political life
- (c) Attitudes towards one's fellow citizens
- (d) Attitudes and expectations regarding governmental output and performance and,
- (e) Attitudes towards knowledge about the political process of decision making

Patrick O'Neil defines political culture as the norms for political activity in a society. It is a determining factor in which ideologies will dominate a country's political regime; it is unique to a given country or group of people.

Andrew Heywood states that political culture is the people's psychological orientation. It implies a pattern of orientation to political objects such as parties, governments and constitutions expressed in beliefs, symbols and values.

On the other hand, Robert A Dahl gives an opinion that political culture as a factor explains different patterns of political opposition whose salient elements are:

- Orientation of problem-solving
- Orientation to collective actions
- Orientation to the political system and
- Orientation to other people (Dahl, 1971)

Almond and Powell (1966) regarded the concept of political culture as a specifying variable in the explanation of political behaviour. It is a particular pattern of political orientation, attitudes towards the political system and its various parts and attitudes toward the role of the self in the system. They elaborate it in three directions:

- Substantive content: this can be interpreted as system culture, process culture and policy culture.
- Varieties of orientation (cognitive, affective and evaluative)
- Systematic relations among these components

According to Lucian Pye (1965), political culture involves attributes including attitudes, feelings, sentiments, beliefs, and values which concern the nature of politics that give form and substance to political processes.

From the above, it can be derived that political culture is a shorthand expression to denote the emotional and attitudinal environment within which the political system operates. In this process, a set of political beliefs, values, and attitudes influences people's political behaviours, and their political behaviours then become a pattern and their political culture. In other words, it is the overall distribution of citizens' orientation to political objects. It gives the impression of the very political processes of a given political system. Thus, this approach of political culture can be used to distinguish one political system from the other. It is, therefore, an important approach in understanding the varied dimensions of comparative politics.

1.2.2 Components and Shifts of Political Culture

Political culture is an analytical approach to comparative politics that is elusive in nature. It has already been mentioned that political culture's intellectual antecedent can be traced back to antiquity. Its immediate antecedents can be found in the works of Montesquieu (1689-1755), Johann Gottfried Herber (1744-1803) and Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-59). Its genesis in modern comparative politics can be traced to Almond's seminal article, 'Comparative Political System' in *The Journal of Politics* (1956). It was, however, with the publication of *The Civic Culture* by Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba (1963) that political culture research emerged as a sub-field of political science. This cross-national study connected individual attitudes with the overall political system. Based on interviews conducted with about a thousand individuals in each of the five countries, the study offered a theory of political stability and democracy that implicitly celebrated Anglo-American representative government. Although there was scepticism over the accuracy of characterising a culture based upon

individual interviews, the study gave a momentum to political culture approach in comparative politics.

During the 1950s and 1960s, the rise of the concept was part of the more general ascension of culture 'to explanatory prominence in the social sciences and history'. Initially, political scientists were excited by the possibility of measuring variations among the political cultures of different nations, but they eventually turned to the study of such entities as 'elite political culture', 'ethnic political culture' etc. In 1966, Elazar proposed that each American state includes one of the three kinds of political culture -individualist, traditionalist or moralist whereby state political culture studies examined variations among states in government activities, administrative goals, innovative capability, popular participation in the election and party competition (Formisano, 2001).

The 1970s saw that political culture literature contained the normative bias that cultural symbols are shaped deeply by all or most actors in a society, thus promoting stability and a conservative ideology.

The perception that the political culture studies tended to privilege the status quo grew stronger amid the rise of Marxist and rational choice perspectives. Whereas with a strong argument for the causal efficacy of political culture, Eckstein and Inglehard defended the Almond and Verba line and argued that different societies embody durable cultural attitudes that have significant economic and political consequences. In a subsequent book, Eckstein added that cultural change in a post-modernist society was much more important than it had been during early industrialization (*A Culturalist Theory of Political Change*, 1988). In this way, there are different opinions regarding the very effectiveness of this approach of political culture.

On the other hand, alongside political culture as a whole, there is the elite political culture that consists of the beliefs, attitudes and ideas about politics held by those who are closest to the centres of political power. The values of the elites are more coherent and consequential than are those of the population at large.

Although most of the studies of political culture focus on its dynamics within the state, the importance of global political culture is worth mentioning here. Global political culture looks at the ambit of the whole world from a macro perspective to understand the all-encompassing aspects of political culture. For example, Samuel P Huntington in his classic work, *The Clash of Civilization*, takes the analysis of political culture into the international realm. But global political culture may primarily be a Western product.

From the above, it may be understood that the political culture approach has been viewed differently by different scholars.

The political culture of a system is a result of several factors. These factors/components over the period of time shape or reshape the political culture. Listed below are some very important components.

- Political beliefs and values
- Political process

- Decision making encompassing the whole system and different agencies including the party system, pressure groups etc.
- Symbols
- Political action
- Orientations
 - Cognitive orientations implying knowledge, accurate or otherwise, of the political system
 - Affective orientations implying feelings of attachment, involvement, rejection, and the like about political objects, and
 - Evaluative orientations implying judgments and opinions about the political objects, which usually involve applying value standards to political objects and events
- Tradition and modernity
- Culturalism
- Societal structure
- Geography
- Ethnic realities or differences
- Role of state
- Ideologies
- Histories of state
- Socio-economic structure
- Form of governance
- Role of the elites



Check Your Progress 1

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.
ii) Check your answer with the answer given at the end of the unit.

1) Define political culture?

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2) What is elite political culture?

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1.3 CLASSIFICATION OF POLITICAL CULTURE

There are different typologies of political culture offered by different scholars based on their research studies. The understanding of some of these types will help us to distinguish the political culture of different systems. Let us examine the classification of political culture taken up two prominent political studies, one by Almond and Verba and the other by Samuel E Finer.

1.3.1 Almond and Verba's Classification

As we already noted, *The Civic Culture* by Almond and Verba (1963) is based on their surveys conducted during 1959-60 in the USA, Britain, West Germany, Italy and Mexico. This study which pioneered the study of political culture as a subfield has identified three pure types of political culture. These are as follows:

(1) Parochial Political Culture: This refers to a political culture where citizens are only distantly aware of the existence of central government- as with remote tribes whose existence is seemingly unaffected by national decisions made by the central government. Further, there is no political orientation towards political objects. People have neither knowledge nor interest in politics. They have no orientations towards all components of politics. This type of political culture is compatible with a traditional political structure. This type of orientation is found in a passive society where there is hardly any specialization of roles, and therefore, people are indifferent towards governmental authority. Thus, in this type of political culture people have low awareness, expectations and participation.

(2) Subject Political Culture: In this political culture, citizens see themselves not as participants in the political process but as subjects of the government - as with people living under a dictatorship. In other words, citizens under this political culture have a passive orientation towards a political system and conceive themselves as having a minimum influence on the political process. In this type of political culture, citizens are aware of the central government, and are heavily subjected to its decisions with little scope for dissent. The individual is aware of politics, its actors and institutions. Citizens have orientations toward the output aspects of the system. People know about decision-making mechanisms. There is a political awareness but no confidence to air political views, thus there is an absence of participatory norms. This type of political culture is compatible with a centralized authoritarian structure. In this model, the people have a higher level of awareness and expectations, but low participation.

(3) Participant Political Culture: In this political culture, citizens believe that they can contribute to the system and that they are affected by it. They, therefore, respond positively to all political objects and have an active orientation to political activities. Here citizens can influence the government in various ways and they are affected by it. The individual is oriented toward the system towards all four components of politics, i.e., input, output, political system, and self-role. This encourages more and more participation and participation is the highest value. There is an ability to criticize the authority and hold a positive orientation

towards the political system. In this model, people have a high level of awareness, expectations, and participation.

Almond and Verba argue that there is never a single political culture. The three categories of political orientations which they have identified are not always present in a pure form; rather they are intermixed in many situations of political culture. Thus, they re-classified political culture into three sub-types. These are discussed below:

(1) Parochial and Subject: This type of political culture represents a shift from parochial orientation to subject orientation. Here the parochial loyalties gradually get weathered and the inhabitants develop a greater awareness of the central authority.

(2) Subject and Participant: This type of political culture represents a shift from subject political orientation to participant political orientation. In such a political culture, people generally on the one hand develop an activist tendency and participate in the process; but on the other hand, there are those individuals too who possess passive orientations and remain at the receiving end of the decision-making process.

(3) Parochial and Participant: This type of political culture represents the parochial orientation in the individuals whereas the norms introduced require a participant political orientation. In such type of political culture, there emerges a problem of harmony between the political culture and political norm. However, Almond and Verba suggest that a participatory political culture fits a liberal democratic regime. The participant political culture is the type of political culture that is congruent with a democratic political structure and the same has been called by them as 'Civic Culture'.

1.3.2 Finer's Classification

Attempting to understand the phenomena of military intervention in the politics of developing countries, Samuel E Finer (*The Man on the Horseback*, 1962) came to relate civil-military relations with political culture. In his analysis, there are four levels of political culture:

(1) Mature Political Culture: In this type of political culture, there is widespread public approval of the procedure for transfer of power; a belief that the persons in power have the right to govern and issue orders; the people are attached to the political institutions and there is a well mobilized public opinion.

(2) Developed Political Culture: In this type of political culture, the civil institutions are highly developed and the public is well organized into powerful groups but from time to time there arises a dispute on the questions of who and what should constitute the sovereign authority and how power should be transferred.

(3) Low Political Culture: At this level of political culture, the political system is weak and narrowly organized; there is a lack of consensus on the nature of the political system and the procedures and the public attachment to the political system is fragile.

(4) Minimal Political Culture: At this low level of political culture, articulate public opinion does not exist in the political system and the government can easily ignore public opinion; political cultures are decided by force or the threat of force. A person or institution capable of asserting itself can enforce its will and the extent of one's authority is directly related to the degree of force at one's disposal. Finer argued that developing countries with weak legitimacy are prone to experience coup d'etat or extreme forms of military intervention.

1.4 POLITICAL CULTURE IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Based on Gabriel A. Almond's classification of political culture and his analysis of its applied factors in different political systems, the following aspects have been highlighted.

According to Almond the four-fold classification of the political system is based on some terms and these are:

- First, a political system is a system of *action*.
- The unit of the political system is the *role*.
- The distinguishing property of the political system is the legitimate *monopoly of physical coercion* over a given territory and population.
- The fourth concept is *the orientation to political action*. The political culture is not the same thing as the general culture, although it is related to it.

Now, here an attempt has been made to throw light on the classifications of Almond regarding political systems and the related culture.

1) Anglo–American Political System: Associated with the advanced countries of the West, even termed as matured political culture, it incorporates the political consensus and higher degree of organization. It is the operating system that acts as the benchmark which is being borrowed by other nationalities. The political culture of this system has the following characteristics:

- A multi-valued, rational-calculating, bargaining, and experimental political culture. It is a homogeneous culture in the sense that there is a sharing of political ends — the values of freedom, mass welfare, and security — and means.
- A secularized political system involves individuation of and a measure of autonomy among the various roles. Each one of the roles sets itself up autonomously in the political business, so to speak. The political system is saturated with the atmosphere of the market. The secularized political process has some of the characteristics of a laboratory; that is, policies offered by candidates are viewed as hypotheses, and the consequences of legislation are rapidly communicated within the system and constitute a crude form of testing hypotheses.

- The basic principles of the system: Liberty, Equality, Democracy, Civic duty, Individual Responsibility, Trade Unionism, etc. Bargaining politics: between rulers and rule (the elected and electors, leaders and its followers)
- Plural society- the society is heterogeneous and therefore different parties and interest groups operate to influence the decision-making process in response to their respective interests.
- Checks and balances- there is a diffusion of power and influence where legal institutions are checked by the channels of mass communication and mass education so that the prospect of authoritarian rule is mitigated, even eliminated.
- Separation of power and stability of differentiated roles
- Political ideologies – multiculturalism, libertarianism, welfare state, utilitarianism, individualism, egalitarianism etc.
- Political folklore- use of symbol
- Civil supremacy

2) Continental European Political System: These are the western countries of Europe like Italy, France, and Norway etc. It's even considered a developed political culture because in these societies public is highly organized.

- Fragmented political culture- the political culture is fragmented where different sections of society establish different patterns of cultural development, while some are more developed than others. Thereby, political culture incorporates distinctive sub-cultures.
- No political bargaining- the process of political bargaining is virtually non-existent that creates a situation in which politics becomes like a game. The result is that various sub-cultures are at war. It is a race of superiority and power.
- Expected criteria- stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights, protection of minority etc.
- Form of governance- it imbibes both monarchism, republicanism, presidential, semi-presidential, parliamentary republic, parliamentary republic etc. For instance, countries like Belgium, Netherland, Sweden, Spain etc. have constitutional monarchies
- Formation of International Organization: for example, the European Union
- Legitimacy of institutions
- Civilian government

3) Developing Countries Political System- This category includes countries that emerged from the days of long colonial domination.

- Master and subjects-the political culture of the masters is superimposed over the political culture of the subjects. The result is the erosion of the

political culture of the subjects and the super-imposition of the political culture of the rulers that is deemed to be superior in all respects

- New source of legitimacy by the rule over time
- Single structure multivariate political culture
- Commonality of history
- Primacy to the subject through providing voting rights and peoples participation in governance
- Agro-industrial fused society.

4) Totalitarian Political System: The countries included here are the Soviet Union and China. These systems are characterised by the following features:

- Legitimacy of centre: the quality of the acceptance of the legitimacy is artificially created. the characteristic orientation to authority tends to be some combination of conformity or apathy produced by the central control or the means of communication and of the agencies of violence
- concentration of power
- hierarchy of bureaucracy, police and army
- coercion as the hallmark of the exercise of authority
- single pattern of cultural development
- unitary system
- lesser people participation

From the above, it is clear that the different political systems have different sets of political culture depending upon the basic factors and constituents as has been discussed earlier.

1.5 CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF POLITICAL CULTURE APPROACH

Political culture approach, for some scholars, may never be the final word in comparative political analysis but, carefully handled, (for them) it can be a useful springboard. Like any other approach, political culture as an approach to the study of comparative politics has both its advantages and disadvantages. Here an attempt has been made to highlight some of the strengths and lacunas of the approach of political culture as pointed by different scholars:

One of the important criticisms against the political culture approach is that it cannot be described as a very precise variable for presenting a morphological study of the modern political system. The approach cannot be taken as a correct barometer of individual behaviour because of the very distinguishing and varied nature of the same.

Lucian Pye criticizes this approach by stating that in no society there is a fundamental distinction between the culture of the rulers and that of the masses. Therefore, any attempt to distinguish them may not bring any productive result.

Others argue that the approach is ambiguous. The political culture is itself a subsystem of the culture in general. In fact, the political culture approach is a by-product of modernization and development theories. It is not certain whether they regard it independent variable or dependent variable, a cause or an effect. As such, the whole perspective happens to become conservative, static and anachronistic. On the other hand, some others question the very assumption of the approach that a system of government continues because it is in tune with a country's political culture. Many descriptions of a political culture are often little more than an exercise in stereotyping which invariably ignores diversity within the country concerned.

In some cases, descriptions of political culture tend to be static as well as simplistic, lacking sensitivity to how a culture continually evolves in response to political experiences. The approach is not progressive but reactionary in character.

Despite these limitations, the political culture approach is not without its merits. The approach of political culture has certainly heightened the ability of political scientists to examine the psychological environment of the political system broadly and scientifically. It has codified and synthesized into a style, a well-developed concept, all that was studied in an abstract and crude fashion through such traditional concepts as national morale, national character, national psychology and the like.

Political culture approach has made it easier for political scientists to systematically and comprehensively analyze the social, psychological and sociological environment of the political system; thereby has contributed to conducting both micro and macro studies of political systems as well as to explain the gap between micro-macro politics. Further, through the political culture approach, political scientists can systematically explain the differences in the behaviour of different political systems, particularly the differences in the behaviour of similar political institutions working in different societies.

Political culture approach has also fortified political scientists to conduct studies in the process through which the political culture of society passes from one generation to the next generation, i.e., the process of political socialization. This can be used for analyzing the path of political development of a political system. The political culture approach has also been used by several political scientists to investigate the nature and dynamics of possible political changes, violent changes- revolutions and coups, in numerous political systems.

Check Your Progress 2

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) Check your answer with the answer given at the end of the unit.

1) In Almond's analysis, what are the features of political culture in totalitarian states?

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- 2) Point out some of the principal drawbacks of political culture as an approach of comparative politics.

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1.6 LET US SUM UP

In the above, the different dynamics of political culture as an important approach to the study of comparative politics has been discussed from where it may be derived that political culture has made Political Science a more complete branch of social science through its insistence on a combined micro-macro approach. It has focused our attention on the study of the political community or society, as a dynamic collective entity as distinct from the individual and on the total political system. Moreover, it encourages political scientists to take up the study of social and cultural factors which are responsible for giving the political culture of a country its broad shape.

As an approach, its pros and cons have also been discussed where it was found that there are arguments both in favour and against its utility in understanding the dynamics of comparative politics. Whatever may be the arguments but it may safely be summed up that through the application of this approach, the political processes of the different systems can best be known and compared.

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1.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress Exercise -1

- 1) There are many ways political culture has been defined. Almond and Verba refer to it as the political orientations and attitudes towards the political system and its various parts, and attitudes towards the role of the self in the system
- 2) Elite culture consists of the beliefs, attitudes and ideas about politics held by those who are closest to the centres of political power. It is generally more coherent and influential.

Check Your Progress Exercise -2

- 1) Political culture in totalitarian states is marked by some combination of conformity or apathy produced by the central control or the means of communication and of the agencies of violence. Coercion is the hallmark of the exercise of authority and there is low people's participation.
- 2) Your answer should list the following: It's not a precise variable for study of modern political systems, difficulties in distinguishing elite and mass culture, ambiguity arising from it being a subsystem of culture, and, can become an exercise in classifying with no explanation of change.

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