

Preface and Acknowledgments

Living conditions for most people in nineteenth-century Ireland were miserable. Was this the result of a flawed, indolent national character, or did Irish poverty have other sources? Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, the pace of democratization has been much slower than many had anticipated. Does this slow pace stem from an ingrained authoritarian streak among Russians or from other factors? Italians are much more likely to vote than Americans. Does this signal a keener appreciation of electoral politics among ordinary citizens in Italy than in the United States? Does the resurgence of parties of the extreme right in some countries of Western Europe reflect a distinctive set of values in the countries concerned, or does it arise from institutional and other structural factors?

These are instances of the broader question that motivates our book. On the one hand are those who argue that much political behavior, along with a host of other outcomes, can be traced back to distinctive sets of norms among different publics. Labeled the “value enactment” approach by Portes (1976), this account attaches great explanatory significance to political or social cultures, or, to use a more current term, social capital. The sets of values associated with different cultures are said to generate distinctive political and social outcomes. Hence the value enactment label. Further, the values involved are durable, changing slowly, if at all, across generations.

The alternative view, which we find much more compelling, is that ordinary citizens everywhere optimize in light of institutional and other constraints that generate varieties of incentive structures. For example, potential voters and candidates for office in a country with a form of proportional representation face a different set of electoral choices than

do citizens in a single-member district system. Peasants living in a low-income country with an authoritarian regime face a different (and much more constricted) set of alternatives or choices than do the middle-class citizens of an established and prosperous democracy. These differences in available choices imply different sets of incentives that in turn affect patterns of behavior.

Further, and in contrast to the value enactment approach, modifications to institutional and other constraints alter the incentive structure and thereby lead to changed patterns of behavior. Instead of taken as fixed, value configurations become the *product* of institutional environments and therefore subject to change. To borrow a central example from recent discussions of social capital, this line of argument implies that levels of trust are created by the institutional environment, not a cause of it. In this account, norms retain a consequential role. At the same time, the institutional approach more readily allows for changed patterns of behavior as current generations are not cast as substantially burdened by the experiences of those who preceded them.

The book is organized as follows. In chapter 1, we frame the analysis by developing the distinctions that are ever so briefly sketched (and thereby oversimplified) here. In particular, we specify the cultural argument and elaborate the premises on which it rests. Along the way, we discuss the different versions of the value enactment approach that have been offered, ranging from earlier claims about national character to contemporary treatments of social capital. We then elaborate the institutional alternative and specify why it is, in fact, an alternative and preferable approach.

The heart of the book has two parts. Part I (chaps. 2 through 4) addresses in detail the empirical bases for the cultural perspective. Here, we evaluate claims that have been made about the ways in which norms shape a variety of outcomes, including economic growth and democratization. Since so many recent studies take Max Weber's thesis about the Protestant ethic as a starting point, chapter 2 centers directly on that argument. Chapter 3 focuses on contemporary discussions of the political consequences of cultural values or social capital in Italy and the United States, to determine whether southern Italy really is different and whether Americans are increasingly prone to going it alone. We broaden the empirical focus across a wider range of cases in chapter 4 to address more general claims about the role of norms in bringing about economic growth and democratization.

Throughout part I, we find limited evidence for the cultural account. At some points in the analysis there is little indication of distinctive cultural values that could be driving anything. At other points, the cultural account

only seems to work if we engage in the most egregious ex post reasoning. Indeed, at several stages in the analysis there are strong suggestions that any systematic patterns in the data that we do observe are more profitably interpreted by means of the alternative institutional framework.

In part II (chaps. 5 and 6), we show that key aspects of mass political behavior are more profitably explained in terms of the incentive patterns generated by different institutional configurations. Our focus on the political behavior of ordinary citizens (as opposed to political elites) is motivated by two considerations. First, the suggestion that rules affect the behavior of political elites such as legislators is hardly novel. While values and norms were once seen as the key element in determining legislators' behavior (e.g., Matthews 1960; Huitt 1961), that day is long gone. Second, arguments about distinctive political cultures associated with the value enactment approach are, at their core, arguments about broad-based constellations of societal values. Hence our focus on the ways in which institutional constraints affect the behavior of ordinary citizens constitutes a stronger evaluation of the argument.

Finally, the particular forms of political behavior considered in part II center on rates of electoral participation and patterns of support for parties of the extreme right. These two forms of political behavior have attracted considerable attention for some time. For example, understanding the sources of political participation and patterns of support for extremist political movements were key components of Lipset's (1960) classic synthesis of political sociology. More recently, Putnam (2000, chap. 1) begins his analysis of declining social capital in the United States with a discussion of patterns of electoral participation. And the unexpected electoral success of many extreme right parties over the past two decades in wealthy Western European democracies has rekindled debate about the cultural origins of antisystem political movements.

We have been working on this project for a little longer than we had originally planned. Along the way, we have accumulated a number of debts.

Much earlier versions of some of the material presented here appeared in "Political Institutions and Voter Turnout in the 1980s," *Comparative Political Studies* 27 (1995): 467-92; "A Renaissance of Political Culture?" and "The Poverty of Political Culture," *American Journal of Political Science* 40 (1996): 632-59, 697-716; "Conditions Favouring Parties of the Extreme Right in Western Europe," *British Journal of Political Science* 25 (1996): 501-21 (with Karin Volpert); and "Social Capital and Politics," *Annual Review of Political Science* 1 (1998): 47-73. While we

have expanded our analyses considerably, we are grateful to the editors and referees of these journals for their constructive comments on those earlier reports from our project, and their comments have continued to inform our work. Since Karin Volpert contributed to the earlier analysis of patterns of support for the extreme right in Western Europe, she is listed as a coauthor of chapter 6 here.

At various points in the book, we have employed materials from the Internet. While this is an impressive source of information, not all Web addresses last forever. The references that we have made to particular Web addresses on the Internet were all current as of November 2003.

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