المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

ACRPS Winter School 2023

Fourth Round: "Political Culture Revisited: How Values Drive Politics" - January 2023

Concept Note

The Winter School (WS) is a 10-day annual forum that seeks to provide an in-depth and critical look at selected topics in the broader study of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). It provides an opportunity for participants to network with regional scholars, gain substantive knowledge and insight, and receive feedback from respected scholars. The WS invites regional and international lecturers and discussants to generate these much-needed discussions and provide participants with nuanced feedback and intellectual exchange. Since its launch in 2019, the WS has received hundreds of applications from all over the world, including many leading international universities.

The theme of the fourth annual WS centres on "**Political Culture Revisited: How Values Drive Politics**" (For more information on past themes, click here). We invite PhD researchers and early career scholars working on this topic to apply, especially those whose work applies the concept to the Arab region.

Political Culture Revisited: How Values Drive Politics

The relationship between culture and politics has been studied since the late nineteenth century. However, the theoretical foundations and the predominant use of "political culture" as a concept, had to wait until the 1960s and 1970s, in American comparative politics research, and in the context of the Cold War. There is a near scholarly consensus that the concept was born of the academic interaction of comparative politics with behaviouralism, while also an ideological response to Marxist historical materialism. It was in this context that Almond and Verba's *The Civic Culture*,[1] generally held to be the founding work of "political culture" studies, first appeared. Almond and Verba defined political culture as "the specifically political orientations—attitudes toward the political system and its various parts, and attitudes toward the role of the self in the system."[2] Later, Almond and Powell expanded this definition, characterising it political culture as "the pattern of individual attitudes and orientations toward politics among the members of a political system. It is the subjective realm, which underlies and gives meaning to political actions".[3]

In time, political culture, as a new academic trend, sought to examine the set of values in which a liberal democracy is most likely to be consolidated and sustained. Such endeavours were both academic and ideological. While it was a legitimate academic question on a topic with long academic traditions, it also assumed, implicitly, if not explicitly, that not only does liberal democracy produce good and resilient institutions capable of preventing conflict and state collapse, but that it is also an exclusive Western cultural production impossible to replicate elsewhere. The concept was thus met with scepticism and criticism: it was charged with being western-centric, essentialist, ideological, orientalist, imperialist, and overgeneralizing.

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1   Sidney Verba & Gabriel Almond, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (California: Sage Publishing, 1963).

2   Ibid., p. 12. Almond had already introduced the idea of political culture in the early 1950s, in his Gabriel A. Almond, "Comparative Political Systems," Journal of Politics, vol. 18, no. 3 (August 1956), p. 3.

3   Gabriel A. Almond & G. Bingham Powell Jr., *Comparative Politics: A Developmental Approach* (Boston: Little Brown and Co., 1966), p.50.

However, over decades, the concept also attracted the attention of generations of researchers who refined its theories, criticized its conceptualizations, and liberated it from its ideological legacy and cultural inequivalence. Scholars have been able to deploy empirically tested notions (such as social capital, trust, hegemony, liminality, informality, identity politics, ideology, religiosity, and cultural framing) that are useful in making cross-national comparisons. They have somewhat succeeded in examining the political influences of the cultural factor, but without making it a catchall concept. Such efforts gave rise to a pluralistic, socially constructed and malleable concept of political culture(s) that differentiates between elite and popular cultures, hegemonic and subaltern cultures and so on. Furthermore, reconsidering the cultural factors entailed a revision of modernization theory. Inglehart and Welzel characterize modernization as a threefold process covering three main domains: economic, cultural, and institutional. Economic development results in a shift from materialist (survival) to post-materialist (self-expression) values, which in turn, reshape political institutions to make them more responsive and efficient.[4]

Subsequently, the political culture theoretical framework has become useful, if not indispensable, to understanding the influence of ideologies, norms, values, religions, and political consciousness of the complex of relations between the participants in the political process, and particularly of the structure of institutions of power. It has been utilized by many other fields in the social sciences such as social movements, social conflicts, political mobilization, nationalism, democratization and so on.

Yet although the concept has been on a long journey of critical revisions in various contexts and fields, research on it is in constant state of evolution. The global "War on Terror" following the 9 / 11 terrorist attacks and the failed US-led attempt of democratic nation-building in post-2003 Iraq, turned the clock back to the time when essentialist prisms of political culture prevailed. The re-emergence of the debate over "Arab exceptionalism", which has produced its own explanatory literature, was evidence of that. Scholars explained the persistence of authoritarianism in the Arab region with reference to generalized notion of political culture and religious sentiments. The idea that Arab-Islamic values contradict principles of participatory governance has also resurged after the defeat of the Arab revolutions, which were followed by ubiquitous deadly state violence, civil wars, widespread displacement, state collapse and an increasing presence of subnational and supranational militias.

Such a trend was not only apparent in the countless analyses and research papers that associated between Islam and violence but was also echoed in the western political rhetoric. For instance, in March 2016, former President Obama, known for his careful and calculated statements, made the following general observation on the Middle East: "You've got countries that have very few civic traditions, so that as autocratic regimes start fraying, the only organizing principles are sectarian" (*The Atlantic,* April 2016). Just a few years later, with the exacerbation of Islamophobic right-wing populism in the West, links between Islam, extremism, and terrorism have become more prevalent and explicit in the speeches and rhetoric of American and European leaders and their main

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4   Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel. "Changing mass priorities: The link between modernization and democracy." *Perspectives on politics* 8, no. 2 (2010): 551 - 567.

opposition (Donald Trump, Emmanuel Macron, Marine Le Pen, Geert Wilders to name but a few). Such generalizations about and towards the Arab region and Islam are very dangerous, as they evoke fatalistic view of the region, lending itself to binary choices that not only ignore the cultural complexities, but could (and have been) also be easily used as a pretext to support dictators and authoritarianism across the region. The permanent revival of this ideological and academic debate towards the MENA demonstrates that the region still lacks in-depth scholarly analysis of the cultural factor in shaping politics in the Arab countries.

More research is needed to address theoretical and methodological challenges inherent in studying the relationship between political culture and political development. Most importantly: How does political culture interact with institutions and other attributes of a polity to produce certain types of political outcomes? How do values and beliefs influence the functioning of government institutions? To what extent are the political culture analytical tools and frameworks able to explain the process of democratization and (re-)autocratization? How do norms, traditions and religious values matter in politics and law?

In order to address these questions, we propose the fourth round of WS to focus on revisiting the theoretical framework of political culture. Submissions across the globe, in a variety of contexts, from early career scholars specialized in different social science disciplines, are welcome. Topics of discussion include, but are not limited to:

- The theoretical development of political culture.
- Trust, social capital, ideology, and political change and stability.
- Religiosity and participatory governance.
- Political culture in comparative contexts.
- Elite culture and popular culture.
- Hegemonic culture vs. subaltern culture.
- Political culture in the transition paradigm.
- Non-Western political culture(s) in western academic discourse.
- Political culture of democracy and authoritarianism.
- The cultural dimension in the Arab revolutions.
- Cultures of political violence.
- The impact of globalization on political culture.
- Liminal crisis and political culture.
- How does political culture determine political outcome?
- Political culture and globalization: the impact of new means of communication on the formation of political culture.

Application Process

- Fill out the application form. This should be accompanied by a current CV and an abstract/ research outline of the proposed paper you would bring to the winter school. The abstract should be no more than 500 words in length.

- It should also be accompanied by a letter of recommendation, the form for which is here. Please send the recommendation form to your referee and have them send it directly to:

    winter.school@dohainstitute.org.

- The deadline for submitting research proposals is 18 September 2022.

- The Academic Committee will notify all applicants about the status of their applications by email.

- Successful applicants should submit complete drafts of papers, between 5,000 and 8,500 words in length, 30 days before the conference begins. Submitted drafts must follow the ACRPS guidelines. Please send all relevant materials to: winter.school@dohainstitute.org.

Funding is available for travel expenses on a competitive basis, and accommodation is provided for all participants.