

GOING GLOBAL

New Challenges and Opportunities in
Research on Democratic Participation and
the Civic Culture

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Over the past half-century since the Civic Culture study, the study of public opinion has gone global. What triggered these developments? And what are their implications for new research challenges in the study of political participation and cultural values?

Despite important transatlantic connections in the community of social scientists and market research organizations, the vast majority of political and social attitudinal surveys in the 1930s and 1940s were based on samples of the population in each nation. The use of dedicated cross-national surveys using a single common instrument or battery of questions—and thus the systematic analysis of cross-national public opinion—first arose with the 1948 study “How Nations See Each Other” by William Buchanan and Hadley Cantril, the USIA International Relations survey, the 1956 International Stratification survey by Harry B.G. Ganzeboom and Paul Nieuwbeerta, the 1957 Pattern of Human Concerns survey, also by Cantril, and above all the path-breaking and widely influential 1959 Civic Culture Study by Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba.

This influential model triggered a quantum leap in the methods and concerns common in comparative political science. It was followed by a number of cross-national studies that investigated citizen participation as well as surveys, sometimes by multilateral organizations, that explored mass attitudes towards European integration and institutions and public commitments to materialist and post-materialist values. Reflecting the steadily expanding borders of the European Union, the Eurobarometer surveys, launched in 1974 and carried out every spring and fall since then, now cover 27 countries. The development of the Eurobarometer contributed directly towards the European Values Survey. Beginning in 1990 the

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survey was replicated as the World Values Study. This project has now carried out representative national surveys of the basic values and beliefs of the publics in more than 90 independent countries, containing over 88 percent of the world's population and covering all six inhabited continents.

During the half-century since the Civic Culture study, the availability of these and other cross-national datasets has revolutionized the study of public opinion. What facilitated these developments?

Many political and intellectual factors have contributed to the internationalization of attitudinal and behavioral surveys. For one thing, as the world has become more interconnected through globalization, the social sciences have been transformed by similar processes. The gradual expansion of the borders of the European Union has played a direct role, as the European Commission has monitored public opinion on a regular basis since the early 1970s through the Eurobarometer and related surveys of mass and elite opinion. In turn, the existence of the Eurobarometer, including the fieldwork organizations and collaborators, served as a model shaping many other initiatives, such as the 1979 European Elections Study and the 1981 European Values Study. Regional and international associations of political scientists have strengthened professional networks and institutional linkages, notably the International Political Science Association and the European Consortium of Political Research, with regular workshops and conferences that have strengthened intellectual and social networks among teams of collaborators.

Particular scholars in the field have had a decisive and enduring impact. Many colleagues have contributed to this process, in particular the early Civic Culture pioneers, Sidney Verba at Harvard University and Gabriel Almond at Stanford. Other notable leaders include Jacques-Rene Rabier in the European Union, Ronald Inglehart at the University of Michigan, Jacques Thomassen at the University of Twente, and Roger Jowell at City University. All have served as intellectual leaders in the profession—initiating, managing, and sustaining major cross-national surveys that, in turn, have had multiplier effects through the funding of public opinion institutes and the training of the next generation of field-work staff and survey analysts.

The most recent spur has been the events of 9/11 and their aftermath in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, renewing American interest in public opinion in the rest of the world. In particular, this concern has stimulated new research in areas such as the Middle East where cross-national social science surveys have previously been nonexistent or scarce. These developments have gradually transformed the geographic scope of coverage, with an exponential surge in the available survey resources occurring during the last decade.

These resources provide new ways to globalize our understanding of comparative public opinion, allowing scholars to move “from nations to

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categories,” one of the key but elusive goals of comparative politics scholars. There are multiple methodological and technical challenges that continue to be raised by cross-national research into social and political attitudes—ranging from issues of conceptual equivalence to questions about the quality and standards used for questionnaire development and piloting, sampling, fieldwork, and analysis. Nevertheless, using these resources, the sub-discipline can build upon the insights of decades of studies to deepen insights into critical issues of democratic consolidation and cultural change.

Most importantly, the availability of many large-scale multi-national surveys covering many societies allows us to move from the analysis of countries to the study of public opinion under a wide variety of institutional and societal contexts, such as in developing and post-industrial economies, in predominately Muslim or Orthodox societies, in newer democracies in Mediterranean and Eastern Europe, or under democratic and autocratic regimes. Through this process, the sub-field is gradually moving from the comparison of individuals and groups within countries as the core unit of analysis towards the comparison of people living under different types of societies and regimes, a development that is capable of providing powerful new insights for the study of comparative politics. The study of global public opinion still needs to address fully the challenge of understanding cultural attitudes and values within a broader institutional context—such as how voting behavior is shaped by electoral systems, how attitudes towards democracy are influenced by regime performance, and how public participation responds to the legal context of civil liberties and political rights—but these sorts of issues represent an exciting and important new agenda for the next generation of researchers.

Of possible related interest: Chapters 25, 37, 52, 53.