SIDNEY VERBA: AN INTELLECTUAL BIOGRAPHY AS *THE CIVIC CULTURE* TURNS 50*

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I. *Theoretical Substance*. II. *Methodology and Practice*.
III. *References*.

When asked to compose an "intellectual biography" of professor Sidney Verba, my first reaction was that this would be a very challenging task. After all, doctor Verba has authored well over a dozen major books in political science. Added to this are dozens of articles in the leading scholarly journals of the discipline, a number of important essays, and many chapters in edited volumes. Surely covering all of this material would be impossible in just a brief introductory essay.

The feeling I had when I considered this voluminous body of work was similar to the feeling that many social scientists have when encountering a large dataset with many variables, for example, the kinds of datasets that Sidney Verba and his many collaborators are known for collecting. If one has, say, 40 indicators of civic engagement and wishes to isolate the patterns underlying all of these items, one could factor analyze the data and draw out the salient underlying components. In this spirit, I decided to approach an intellectual biography of Sidney Verba by doing an "intellectual factor analysis" of his many scholarly contributions. What are the major dimensions that shaped these many books, essays, and articles?

Of course, in the factor analysis of survey items, we must identify a formula for extracting the latent components. In extracting the factors behind professor Verba's work, I will employ MLT Estimation. That stands for

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"Maximum Liberty Taken" Estimation. I will freely canvass his contributions, noting the principal themes that have emerged and made him a central figure in the study of comparative political behavior and democracy. In total, I have isolated six principal components, three that might be listed under "theoretical substance", and three that could fall under the heading of social science "methodology and practice".

I. Theoretical Substance

The first underlying theme running throughout Verba's writings is democratic inclusion —that is, "voice"— and equality. At its best, democracy is an expansive project, with political elites encouraged to seek out new supporters and respond to the collective wishes of the people. In principle, all citizens in a democracy have an equal opportunity to take part in civic life and have their voice heard. These ideals are epitomized in the practice of holding regular elections: All may participate, and all votes are weighted equally. Through careful empirical mapping across a number of studies, Sidney Verba has shown that in no democracy are voters equal in their ability to transmit messages to those in positions of power. In the first place, some citizens opt not to voice their preferences at the ballot box. Among those who do, the quality of the ballots may vary quite a bit. Some voters will be well informed and could explain in great detail why they vote as they do, while others may come close to flipping a coin when making decisions. From a more subjective standpoint, some citizens believe that their input makes a difference; others do not. Furthermore, as was thoroughly documented in the *Civic Culture* study, in any democracy some members of the public will see themselves more as "subjects" of political authority than as participants in the creation of a mandate for governing officials.

As we move towards more labor —intensive or money— intensive forms of political participation, fewer and fewer individuals become involved. If the foundation of democratic inclusion is the voicing of preferences through collective action, the choir shrinks markedly as more is demanded from the singers. This reduction in involvement need not make government less responsive to broad national concerns, however, provided that the more active subset of the electorate views politics in ways that are broadly reflective of the general public. In the *Civic Culture* and later works, doctor Verba explored the extent to which the more involved members of a society are in fact representative in this sense. Time after time, the potential for significant

biases emerged. While all may in theory possess a voice in politics, not all of us use it, or use it as much as the others.

In a democracy, what holds some citizens back from inclusion? In a memorable phrase in *Voice and Equality*, which came out in 1995, Sidney Verba and his coauthors Kay Schlozman and Henry Brady provide a pithy framework for analysis. People do not participate in politics "because they can't, because they don't want to, or because nobody asked" (p. 15). This statement directs our attention to a number of analytical questions, some of which were originally raised in the *Civic Culture*. To suggest that a citizen "can't" participate in politics prompts us to consider personal resources such as education and family income, and the distributions of these resources across the wider society. The extent to which variations in wealth and other socioeconomic resources are carried over into civic life tells us much about the quality of democratic representation.

In the *Civic Culture*, Almond and Verba identify education as a leading force shaping democratic engagement across systems as different as Mexico, the United States, Great Britain, West Germany, and Italy. While this creates the possibility of biased representation —or, as E. E. Schattschneider (1960) famously put it, the possibility of a chorus singing with an upper-class accent— the two authors were upbeat in the early 1960s about the prospects for effective participation, at least in the United States and Great Britain. In later work, professor Verba grew increasingly concerned about resource inequalities in the United States, and the shadow that these inequalities cast over democratic involvement.

To posit that some citizens do not take part in political life because they "don't want to" brings the notion of individual choice and agency into the analysis (more on this below). And to say that some do not participate because "nobody asked" prompts us to look at how the major political institutions within a nation —the party system, the configuration of groups and social movements, the principal lines of division and debate— mobilize or demobilize the electorate. As an approach to the analysis of democratic inclusion and equality, the "can't, don't want to, or nobody asked" framework for inaction does what a good comparative theoretical framework should: it helps us frame our research questions.

Continuing with this intellectual factor analysis, another major component underlying Sidney Verba's work is an interest in the *roots of political engagement and motives*. Many citizens appear to be uninterested in politics and blissfully unaware of prominent national issues. Others are deeply committed to public affairs. Still others, whom you might see in coffee

shops and student unions, live and breathe politics. What explains this great variety of dispositions? If a citizen doesn't care about politics, *why* does he or she not care? The *Civic Culture* highlights the importance of values and cultural traditions, authority patterns within one's family during childhood, and the socializing influences of primary and secondary groups. Such variables, among others, shape symbolic orientations towards the governing regime and nation, and define how citizens see themselves as political actors. Early learning provides a template for particular forms of civic practice, and these patterns are refined over the course of one's life.

If we jump forward about a decade, Verba and Norman Nie consider the rationality of participation in their (1972) book *Participation in America*. This is a theme that continues to be explored in later work in the United States and cross-nationally. The concepts that come up here are foundational in the rational-choice literature: incentives, opportunities, costs, and benefits (see, for example e.g., Olson 1971). People with an interest in politics are seen as goal-oriented. They want to get things done in government. Along the way, they also receive other benefits that political action can provide – for example, fun and excitement, an opportunity to meet new people, and recognition from others.

It appears that Sidney Verba and his collaborators attempt to build a bridge between two well-established theoretical islands, the culturalist and the rational-choice literatures. This is not about paradigm shifting, but paradigm connecting. While accepting that there is much more to political motivations and interests than culturalist explanations might suggest, he also questions the narrow understanding of political involvement based on personal material incentives which, if taken to a logical end, may result in many forms of democratic engagement, voting in particular, being labeled "irrational". In a 2005 symposium in *Perspectives on Politics*, Verba pointedly questions the premise of conventional rational-choice modeling. The author of the *Civic Culture* reminds readers that values, culture, and institutions that have evolved over long historical periods must be part of any theoretical model of how citizens think about "costs" and "benefits". The utility of participation is not just about getting the most materials benefits for oneself relative to costs.*

* Indeed, in a 2001 lecture given at the Center for the Study of Democracy at the University of California-Irvine, Verba questions whether the "costs" of political activity can be truly separated from "benefits" in a standard cost-benefit calculation. Some demanding forms of involvement —perhaps participation in neighborhood-watch organizations, political rallies, or social movements— might be highly valued precisely because they are so costly.

This emphasis on values, culture, and history brings me to the third substantive component that has been extracted through my MLT estimation, the sensitivity to *context*. The goal of the *Civic Culture* was to map democratic practices to institutional and historical circumstances. To do this effectively, the authors needed to sample widely. Hence, the electorates from five very different nations were put underneath the microscope. Approximately one decade later, the data that became the basis for the book *Participation and Political Equality* (Verba, Nie and Kim, 1978) were collected. Six fresh cases were added to the mix at that time: Yugoslavia, Austria, the Netherlands, Nigeria, Japan, and India. A few years later, additional comparative data were drawn from Sweden. This rich sampling of contexts allowed Verba and his coauthors to explore how variations in group configurations and party systems interact with socioeconomic resources and background culture to shape political expression.

In the mid-1970s, Sidney Verba, Norman Nie and John Petrocik extended this consideration of context to changing political environments within a single country, the United States. *The Civic Culture* and *Participation and Political Equality* present snapshots of democratic engagement at particular historical moments. While it is true that the *Civic Culture* surveys had a temporal element to them —follow-up interviews were conducted with selected respondents about six months after the national surveys—Almond and Verba did not analyze attitude change in the way that users of the Mexico Panel Studies of 2000 and 2006 might (Lawson *et al*. 2007). In *The Changing American Voter* (Nie, Verba and Petrocik, 1976), however, the central focus is on how the public responds to new issues and new forms of political mobilization. In brief, the authors show that when public affairs become more engaging, more citizens engage. The low levels of ideological awareness and political sophistication in the 1950s and early 1960s that Campbell *et al*. (1960), Converse (1964), and others so thoroughly described may well have been a reflection of the times. This takes us further away from the "culturalist" school.

Jorge Domínguez and I carried this line of reasoning into our (1996) book *Democratizing Mexico*. Beginning in the mid-1980s, political competition in Mexico grew much more intense. The traditional ruling party continued to rule during this period, but its hold on Mexican political life was seriously challenged in the wake of a devastating economic crisis and the rise of new activist groups. Using survey questions inspired by the *Civic Culture* study, Domínguez and I discovered that in 1988 and 1991, a significantly larger portion of the mexican public followed politics closely

compared to the 1950s, and levels of interest were not shaped as much by education, gender, and residence in the capital city. Moreover, in the 1980s and 90s, fewer Mexican citizens could be classified as "authoritarian" in their outlook towards leadership, and these attitudes were less conditioned by traditional socioeconomic variables. We found, as Nie, Verba, and Petrocik (1976) did in the U.S., that patterns of democratic orientations are not completely exogenous features of a political culture, but instead respond in part to real-world events, challenges, and opportunities.

II. Methodology and Practice

The final three components in my intellectual factor analysis relate to Sidney Verba's contributions to the methodology of social science. As Verba himself wrote in one piece a few years ago (Verba, 2006, p. 500), he is a "foot-on-the-ground empirical researcher." Gary King, Robert Keohane, and Sidney Verba stress in their now-classic (1994) *Designing Social Inquiry* that the aims of empirical research are a) to make sound descriptive inferences about a political system, and b) to arrive at valid inferences regarding cause and effect.

Describing and explaining are central in all of Sidney Verba's work. In pursuing these goals, he has been a true methodological pluralist. Let us make that the label for Factor #4: *methodological pluralism*. While the *Civic Culture* featured state-of-the-art survey research methods, a book that predates this study, *Small Groups and Political Behavior* (Verba, 1961), presents the results from social psychological experiments on leadership. Experiments are now common in political science (Gerber and Green, 2008). Fifty years ago, this was not the case. Over the years, Verba has also drawn evidence from focus groups, case studies, and textual content analyses. This is clearly a scholar with a well-stocked tool belt.

This methodological pluralism extends to *disciplinary pluralism*, my fifth latent factor. Political science borrows concepts and methods freely from economics, sociology, psychology, anthropology, and other fields. This tendency will strike many readers as natural, but in the late-1950s, such borrowing was frowned upon in some circles. I recall a story that Sidney Verba told years ago about his initial search for a faculty position after graduate school. Some months after interviewing at an institution, one of the professors from that institution bumped into him and said something to the effect of, "Tell me, Mr. Verba, have you decided yet which field you are in?"

In Verba's work, theoretical questions and methodological innovations came before disciplinary boundaries. He writes in *Small Groups and Political Behavior* that "this book is conceived of largely as a contribution to political science. Most of the material, however, is derived from sources outside of what is ordinarily called political science… One might well ask: 'Is this political science?' My answer would be, 'I don't know. It depends on what you mean by political science. And though it matters if it is or not, it does not matter much'" (9). Fortunately, this disciplinary pluralism did not make Professor Verba ineligible for the presidency of the American Political Science Association, a position he held from 1994 to 1995.

The final methodological dimension to Sid Verba's work that I wish to emphasize is its *transparency*. All of the operational decisions that go into the research process are spelled out. In lengthy appendices, we find information on question wordings, sampling strategies, and the like (see, *for example*., the four appendices in Nie, Verba and Petrocik, 1976, or the six in Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995). This is good science. Even better science is the archiving of the raw data themselves, which Verba has regularly done, beginning well before major journals and research foundations started to require this. This transparency allowed Jorge Domínguez and me to replicate and extend some of Almond and Verba's analysis (Domínguez and McCann, 1996, Chapter 2). We are hardly the only ones to have downloaded Verba's surveys from the Interuniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) archive to reanalyze the results. Seeing datasets, analyses, and interpretations as ultimately "public goods" is a principle that Verba also took to heart during to his many years of service as director of the Harvard library system. Under his watch, Harvard led the digitization revolution in archiving and disseminating scholarly works.

I should further mention that whenever I teach our introductory course on U.S. politics, I take students through various findings from the *Civic Culture* and the *Citizen Participation* surveys. Even at this level, I believe it is important to share both substance and methods with undergraduates. These studies not only let me illustrate essential theoretical points concerning democratic engagement and representation, but also brag about the analytical ambition and public-spiritedness of some senior colleagues in the profession – notably Sidney Verba.

III. References

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