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The Relation between Cultural Values and Models of Democracy

The relation between democracy and culture is a long-lasting subject of interest in political science. There is a broad variety of definitions, interpretations and dimensions of both concepts. In the scholarly literature on politics, “culture is about interpretation of basic meanings in social life” (Lane & Wagschal, 2012). In the contemporary approach of cultural analysis, value orientations are studied as the important manifestation of culture.

The mainstream of research has focused on finding a relation between the quality of a democratic system (e.g. effective democracy) and the existence of essential values (e.g. self-expression values). There is,

however, an understudied question as to what the relation between cultural values and models of democracy in different countries exactly is. We know that there are different models or patterns of democracy (e.g. majoritarian vs. consensus and participatory vs. spectator democracy) in various countries. But what is the reason that a particular country, or set of countries, appreciates and accepts one type of democracy, while suspecting and discrediting other types?

This paper aims to find an answer to this question from the perspective of cultural differences. Indeed we start to hypothesize that there is an affinity between societal cultural orientations and the adopted model of democracy in a country. This hypothesis will

be examined empirically through the operationalization of two dimensions of democracy, contestation and participation, and recognizing four models of democracy in 84 countries. We utilize the well-recognized global value surveys (WVS) and cross-cultural theories (Hofstede, Schwartz) in our analysis to examine the relation between cultural values and models of democracy.

The main conclusion of the paper is that societies with a stronger inclination towards a so-called “mastery” culture tend to lean stronger to an aggregative (or majoritarian) model of democracy rather than an integrative (or consensual) model. On the other hand, countries with a lower “power-distance” culture are more inclined to the participatory model of democracy, while countries with a higher power-distance culture are rather inclined to spectator democracy. This study asserts that the preference for and success of a model of democracy in a country can be sensitive to the compatibility of cultural orientations and democratic models. Rather than focusing on the “best model” of democracy, we propose to pay more and closer attention to the “most compatible model” of democ-

racy in cross-national research. Taking into account the cultural orientations of a society, in addition to other social and situational factors, we can more fruitfully advise countries in transition to democracy.