Civil Society: An Introduction
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A New AP Topic
During the past two decades, several disparate trends have brought the ideas and theories of civil society into academic discussions. These exchanges take place among students of U.S. government, comparative government, and international relations. The discussions are not identical, but the topic is more and more prominent.

The phrase "civil society" does not appear in the current Course Descriptions or outlines for the AP Government & Politics courses. However, the conceptual elements that make up civil society are individually spelled out in the U.S. Course Description. The term itself shows up in the Course Description for the new comparative curriculum that will be used beginning in the fall of 2005. Our students need to be ready to discuss it in free-response questions and understand it in multiple-choice questions.

When I looked at several popular U.S. government textbooks, I did not find any specific reference to civil society. However, as in the AP Government & Politics Course Description, the elements of civil society are described in all the textbooks. Several comparative government texts define the term and offer examples, but others don't mention it directly. So, for the most part it's up to us as teachers of AP Government & Politics courses to put the pieces of this concept together for our students.

Civil Society as a Global Term
Many people became aware of the concept of civil society during the breakdown of the Soviet system in Eastern Europe. If civil society refers to the voluntary, nongovernmental associations people form, then the Solidarity movement in Poland was a prime example of such an association. The evangelical congregations in East Germany (especially East Berlin) and the organizations associated with the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia are others. Those organizations, outside of the government and official parties, offered alternatives and new ideas. Lech Walesa and Vaclav Havel were civil-society heroes and celebrities. Walesa was elected president of Poland in 1990 and Havel was elected president of Czechoslovakia in 1989. The power of civil society was undeniable.

In studying U.S. government and politics, our students should be aware of the basic ideas of Robert Putnam and Francis Fukuyama about social capital and civil society. In their speculations about civil society, the emphasis is on the vital role that autonomous organizations play in creating and maintaining democratic society. In addition, the heirs to Reagan's smaller-government theses talk about civil society as a viable alternative to big government. The current administration's efforts to promote faith-based social services and school vouchers are based on assumptions about civil society as much as on moral precepts.

While the American concerns about civil society build on the experiences of anticommunist groups and the substitution of private for public services, the African notions of civil society often focus on anti-imperialism. In many African countries, notably South Africa, building civil society is seen as a way to create indigenous alternatives to the Western-style regimes created after independence. Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress could not have been successful without the civil-society organizations (unions, congregations, newspapers, neighborhood societies, and sports teams) they built in spite of the limitations of apartheid. Conversely, exclusive ethnic and religious loyalties threaten democracy in many African countries. As in the former Yugoslavia, civil society in Africa can be a destabilizing force as well as a foundation for democratic regimes.

Civil Society in the Muslim World
In the Middle East, North Africa, and Southeast Asia, Islamists have different takes on civil society. We have to emphasize the plurality of that statement, for there are many ideas in countries where most people are Muslim. Since there is no ecclesiastical
In many of these countries, civil society is identified almost exclusively with Islam. Some non-Islamic organizations are tolerated in some places; none in others. However, in predominantly Muslim countries (with the exception of Turkey and perhaps Pakistan), the concept of divisions between religion, government, and civil society is much less pronounced than in the non-Muslim world.

In some Islamic countries, there are commercial and intellectual elites that offer alternative or competing civil organizations to the mosque, the madrasa (school), and the jamiat (university). That competition is a significant part of the politics of Iran, where an educated elite runs businesses, publishes newspapers, and attends secular universities. In any case, the roles of government and civil society in Islamist contexts while different from those roles in Western contexts, are no less important.

In India, a Hindu mirror of this Islamist take on civil society is represented by the Bharatiya Janata Party, which has become a leading party by seeming to reject some Western-style notions of civil society. Hindu nationalist civil society groups, like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, a national volunteers association, have been vital to the success of the BJP.

Defining Civil Society

Civil society (in theory and practice) means many things. My students often begin by asking, "Does this mean that people are nice to each other?" My answer is, "Yes, partly." Most definitions include the idea that social norms, if not laws, set standards for tolerance, appropriate discourse, and individual freedom. But none of the definitions end there. Indeed, this is one of the places where the ideas of Islamists and those who practice identity politics diverge from Western concepts of civil society.

In fact, most definitions begin by emphasizing organizations or associations. Civil society is described as "the realm of social life which when viewed from the perspective of government is characterized by plural and particularist identities" (Rosenblum and Post, p. 3). In other words, in Western society there is a great diversity of civil organizations to which people choose to belong. In fact, there are so many that people find conflicts between the goals of groups to which they belong.

In the U.S. context, all political parties, interest groups, Rotary Clubs, congregations, corporations, media outlets, unions, teams, business associations, professional groups, neighborhood associations, and bowling leagues people belong to are parts of civil society. Combine that with the behavioral standards for tolerance and individual freedom and you have a general idea of what is most often meant by civil society in the West.

This kind of fluid structure of civil society contrasts with the segmented structure in other political systems (Rosenblum and Post, pp. 4-5). Independent and open associations are not the norm everywhere. In Russia, Vladimir Putin's government has moved to take control of broadcast media and make it part of the state. In Nigeria, ethnic associations are open only to certain people and are often the only groups to which people belong. In China, the Communist Party tries to ensure that all organizations are controlled by the government, so groups like Falun Gong and Christian "house churches" are suppressed at every opportunity.

Political scientists study these civic organizations as interest groups. But the groups are also elements of the political culture -- places where people learn to participate, learn how to "play by the rules," and learn how the system works.

So, even if a U.S. hockey team does not play a political game of any kind, participants may learn political lessons. If the team is involved in policy issues as simple as who gets to play at 5:00 p.m. rather than at 5:00 a.m., or who pays for the building of new ice rinks, it is political. Similarly, a Nigerian who lives in an ethnically segregated neighborhood and belongs to an ethnically based support group that works to get a new water spigot installed in the neighborhood is learning political lessons. A worker in a Shanghai automobile factory who belongs to a factory-organized union learns very different political lessons than those learned by a UAW member in Detroit. And a peasant farmer whose only nonfamily association occurs when he attends Friday prayers at a mosque in a mountain village north of Kermanshah participates differently and learns different lessons than the doctor in Tehran who goes to Friday prayers and belongs to a medical society and a tennis club.

Civil Society in the AP Government & Politics Classroom

What the ideas about civil society do -- in AP Government & Politics courses -- is expand notions about political participation and elaborate on what we discuss as political culture and socialization. The ideas about civil society offer a vocabulary and a structure to use when organizing descriptions about how political systems work. They are important concepts for our students to grasp and make use of in their analysis of all manner of government and politics.

Bibliography


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