



A Matter of Kind or Degree? Using Typologies in Comparative Research

Contributors: Henrik Serup Christensen

Pub. Date: 2019

Access Date: January 6, 2019

Academic Level: Postgraduate

Publishing Company: SAGE Publications Ltd

City: London

Online ISBN: 9781526467027

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781526467027>

© 2019 SAGE Publications Ltd All Rights Reserved.

This PDF has been generated from SAGE Research Methods Cases.

Abstract

The Civic Culture by Almond and Verba is often seen as the start to comparative research into political attitudes and their implications for democracy. However, despite several studies following in their footsteps, one of the key lessons has rarely been incorporated since the use of typologies has rarely been used, even though contemporary research ostensibly focuses on different types of citizens. Researchers often disavow grouping people according to theoretical definitions since it is presumably entails a loss of information, but this approach can also provide new insights. Nevertheless, it entails special challenges when it comes to establishing the theoretical classification and empirically verifying the validity. This case study discusses the use of typologies in comparative research by providing examples from research on classifying different kinds of political dissatisfaction. It shows how identifying different types of dissatisfaction can help understand the different interpretations of what the developments in attitudes entail for democracy.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case, students should be able to

- Understand when typologies can be useful in comparative research
 - Know how to categorize respondents with survey data according to predefined theoretical criteria
 - Know how to operationalize typologies with survey data
 - Understand basic elements of analyzing causes and consequences with typologies
-

The Use of Typologies in Comparative Research

In comparative research, we often want to establish how well we can predict developments in a dependent variable by knowing developments in one or more independent variable(s). For example, we may want to know how well the level of political trust predicts support for democracy across countries. We can measure the degree of political trust and support for democracy and find the extent of the relationship with the help of a straightforward regression analysis, possibly controlling for other factors. This type of research question remains the norm within the field of comparative politics.

Nevertheless, at times, we may be interested in knowing how different groups of citizens differ in their attitudes to political structures and their fellow citizens. This entails that the research question becomes a question of kind rather than degree since the aim is to examine causes and consequences of group belonging rather than to explore relationships between continuous variables. This demands an approach to the empirical analyses that poses some particular problems, but it may well be worth the trouble since it can give new insights into the issues at hand.

2019 SAGE Publications, Ltd

The following outlines three basic challenges that all researchers have to confront when using such typologies in survey research. For each step, I present examples from my own research using typologies. Together with other researchers, I created a typology of political attitudes that classified people into four different types of citizens and I use experiences from this to illustrate what each step entails in practice. I also present examples from *The Civic Culture* (Almond & Verba, 1963), which constitutes a classical example of the use of typologies in comparative research.

The Civic Culture

In *The Civic Culture*, Almond and Verba examine the relevance of political culture for democratic stability. This was a path-breaking study that paved the way for modern comparative research based on quantitative analyses of survey data (Denk, Christensen, & Bergh, 2015). Today, we have an abundance of available sources of comparative survey data covering all regions of the World, but Almond and Verba had to collect data themselves. Consequently, they were forced to limit themselves to data from five countries: the United States, United Kingdom, Mexico, Italy, and Germany. Despite this narrow scope, their study constituted a monumental advance in systematic cross-national data collection and analysis at the time.

One of the key contributions in *The Civic Culture* is that Almond and Verba identify three political subcultures with distinct orientations to political authorities:

- The *parochial political* culture includes individuals that are orientated to be politically passive and have indifferent orientations toward the political system.
- The *subject political* culture consists of individuals with positive orientations toward the political system, but more orientated to be politically passive within the system.
- The *participant political* culture includes individuals with positive orientation toward the political system and active roles within the systems.

Almond and Verba maintain that democratic systems need to simultaneously give political elites the freedom to make independent decisions while remaining responsive to citizens' demands. To achieve these contradictory aims, the citizenry should reflect a suitable mix of allegiance, deference and involvement. Consequently, the ideal *civic culture* that could sustain a democratic system therefore consisted of a balanced mix of all three subcultures. This made the composition of political orientations in society critical for the survival of democratic systems.

While the study has received both theoretical and empirical critique, it may be seen as the beginning of the modern comparative analysis of attitudes and political cultures. Following in the footsteps of Almond and Verba, a rich strain of literature has discussed the existence of different types of citizens based on attitudinal and behavioral patterns (Dalton, 2004; Dalton & Welzel, 2014; Hay, 2007; Inglehart, 1997; Norris, 1999, 2011; Stoker, 2006). Much of this literature has examined changes in attitudes over time to determine the consequences for the functioning of democracy.

Contemporary Approaches to Political Culture

Even when the focus on types of citizens seemingly implies a typological approach, most studies have approached the question as a question of degree rather than kind. Consequently, the contemporary academic debate has largely revolved around the development in political attitudes in democracies and the consequences for democracy. Some argue that citizens are growing disenchanted with politics and that this development spells trouble for democracies (Hay, 2007; Stoker, 2006). Others contend that the changes could be beneficial for democracy since citizens are increasingly willing and able to assert their demands to decision makers (Dalton & Welzel, 2014; Inglehart, 1997; Norris, 1999).

Most contributions implicitly or explicitly assume that citizens are converging into a single type of citizen (Dalton, 2004, p. 23; Hay, 2007, pp. 46–49; Norris, 2011). Hence, although this research has spawned important insights, the study of sub-cultures, which entails the coexistence of different attitudinal profiles, has been neglected in the empirical work on political attitudes (for exceptions, see, for example, Abdelzadeh & Ekman, 2012; Amnå & Ekman, 2014; Geissel, 2008).

To think about research problems as differences of kinds rather than degree involves a particular approach to the empirical study of attitudes and their consequences. To follow the path set out by Almond and Verba entails outlining classifications or typologies of citizens based on their attitudinal and behavioral characteristics. While this approach is by no means inherently superior, it can provide fresh new insights.

Theoretical Classifications of Citizens

The first step in using typologies for empirical research is to outline the defining characteristics of the typology. This involves identifying the theoretical dimensions that are of importance to the topic at hand and to determine how combining these dimensions can yield separate categories.

In *The Civic Culture*, Almond and Verba base their typology on an assessment of any individuals' knowledge, affection and evaluation of (1) the political system; (2) input objects, that is, actors involved in converting demands into policies; (3) output objects, that is, actors responsible for the implementation of these policies; and (4) the perception of his or her own role in the political system.

Based on this, they identify *the parochial political culture*, where people are largely unaware of all four elements (system, input objects, output objects and own role). In the *subject culture*, there is an awareness of the political system and its authority, but it is largely a passive role where there is no intention of possibilities of providing input into decision making or in other ways ascertaining an active role in the system. Finally, in the *participant political culture*, individuals are oriented to the political system as a whole, and to both input and output aspects of the system. Furthermore, they tend to hold an "activist" view of their role in the system, meaning they are willing and able to take part.

2019 SAGE Publications, Ltd

While this typology may seem dated for describing citizens of today, the important lesson is that Almond and Verba are meticulous in describing how these subcultures are constructed, and what their combinations entail for dominant attitudes to the political system. In this sense, their work is still a landmark for how to construct typologies, even if the specific typology that they develop may be less suitable for describing the heterogeneous populations of today.

In my research on typologies of citizen attitudes, I identified two attitudinal dimensions that capture important differences in how individuals perceive the political system and their role in this system (Christensen, 2016a; Denk et al., 2015). The first dimension is referred to as political support, and this concerns attitudes to the political system, authorities and their actions. This dimension covers similar ideas as the first three points outlined by Almond and Verba, but is usually associated with the work of Easton (1965) and his work on diffuse and specific political support. This dimension forms the core attitudinal component in several important studies on political attitudes and political culture (Dalton, 2004; Norris, 1999, 2011). However, to comprehend how citizens orient themselves today, it is imperative to acknowledge that political attitudes are multidimensional. I therefore outline a second dimension, which concerns how individuals perceive their own role in the political system.

While the first dimension has received considerable attention in the literature on political attitudes, the importance of this second dimension has been somewhat neglected, even if it largely corresponds to what Almond and Verba include under their fourth point outlined above. It was a particular challenge to convince the skeptical reader that a second dimension outlining attitudinal differences was necessary and that it differed from the first dimension. I therefore had to outline the differences theoretically and to explain why the two-dimensional approach gave advantages over a more parsimonious approach. The central point was that there are important differences in the implications of these attitudinal dimensions depending on how individuals situate themselves along both of these.

The second step included using these two dimensions to identify different types of citizens. As outlined, previous literature operated with similar dimensions, but the emphasis was on identifying their independent effects rather than identifying different types of citizens based on their combinations. [Figure 1](#) shows how the two dimensions are used to identify different types of citizens.

Figure 1. A typology of political dissatisfactions.

		Dimension 2: Own role	
		High	Low
Dimension 1: Political support	High	<i>TYPE 1</i>	<i>TYPE 2</i>
	Low	<i>TYPE 3</i>	<i>TYPE 4</i>

By conceiving the two dimensions as orthogonal, they can be used to identify four types of citizens that vary in their scores on both dimensions:

- *Type 1.* High scores on both dimensions and these people thereby combine a high degree of political support with an active perception of their own role in the political system. This is often considered to be the ideal for how citizens in a representative democracy ought to feel.
- *Type 2.* Combines a high degree of political support with a passive conceptualization of the citizen role in democracy. This type of citizens then conforms to an elitist notion of citizenship where people ought to passively follow the lead of political elites.
- *Type 3.* This corresponds to a person with low support for political authorities, but a highly active view of their own role in this system. This kind of citizen resembles the critical citizen identified by Norris (1999), who argues that these citizens are helpful for democracy since the activist stance help keep decision makers accountable by scrutinizing their actions.
- *Type 4.* Combines low scores on both dimensions, thereby encompassing people who have lost hope both in the political system and their own abilities to change matters. These disenfranchised citizens (Stoker, 2006) thereby constitute the most serious threat to democratic legitimacy since they question the very basis of the political system.

While it is important to acknowledge that there may be other ways to classify citizens, this classification helps identify different types of political dissatisfaction with very different implications for democracy. People being dissatisfied is not necessarily a democratic problem, it depends on what type of dissatisfaction that is prevailing.

A somewhat unexpected challenge that was never really solved in a satisfactory manner concerns how to label the four ideal types. While this is a minor detail as long as each category is carefully described, it is helpful to use labels that in an intuitive manner communicate the key contents of each category. In the end,

2019 SAGE Publications, Ltd

Type 1 was referred to as *satisfied citizens*, whereas the other three types, which all involve some type of political dissatisfaction, are referred to as *disempowered*, *unsupportive* and *disenchanted* citizens. Although it is possible to envisage more telling descriptions, the labels communicate the key differences between the different types of dissatisfied citizens.

Data Selection and Operationalization

After having established the theoretical basis for the typology, the following step is deciding how to operationalize this empirically. This first of all means finding data that include indicators to make the appropriate theoretical distinctions. When it comes to cross-country comparative research, time and budget constraints mean that it is often impossible to gather own data as Almond and Verba did. Fortunately, there is today several cross-country survey projects that gather such data and make it available for free. The best known examples are the *World Values Survey* (<http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org>), the *European Values Study* (<http://www.europeanvaluesstudy.eu>), the *International Social Survey Program* (<http://www.issp.org>), and the *European Social Survey* (<http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org>). While all of these are valuable sources of data, they differ in the countries included, time frame, and available indicators so it is necessary to determine which of them suit the needs for the current research endeavor.

An important issue when making this choice is whether the material includes the indicators needed for empirically operationalizing the empirical dimensions. This involves how many indicators are needed and what aspects of the typology are they related to. It is necessary to carefully scrutinize the different sources to see what relevant indicators they include and how well they are measured. Here, it is prudent to include several indicators for all theoretical concepts, although this may not be possible at all times. When using secondary data compiled by others, it may not be possible to find ideal indicators for all aspects, so some tradeoffs are likely to occur at this stage. This is especially the case when it is necessary to ensure that the data also include a sufficient number of countries that cover the geographical scope of the study. It may be necessary to restrict the number of indicators to achieve this aim.

For my research aims, I used the fourth wave of the European Social Survey (ESS) launched in 2008. This was partly because the ESS consists of high-quality data with ample information on data collection. But it was also the only available data source that included several suitable indicators on both dimensions. Whereas most surveys include indicators on political support, indicators on the second dimension and how individuals perceive their own role are scarce. It was therefore necessary not only to restrict the study to Europe, but it was also not possible to examine developments over time since later waves of the ESS did not include all necessary indicators.

For the political support dimension, I used two indicators: a composite index measuring the degree of political trust and a single item measuring the degree of satisfaction with democracy on a scale 0–10. For the second dimension, I also found two suitable indicators: The level of political interest was measured with a single question, where the respondents indicate their level of political interest. The second indicator was internal

2019 SAGE Publications, Ltd

political efficacy, or the extent to which people feel they are capable of influencing political decisions, which was measured with an index constructed based on two questions where respondents indicated the extent to which they feel they could influence political matters. While this left me with relatively few indicators, it was sufficient to measure the two dimensions and thereby operationalize the typology outlined above.

Verifying Typologies With Empirical Data

The first step in the empirical analysis is to verify that the typology is viable in empirical research. There are different approaches available for doing so, but a basic distinction can be made between set-theoretic approaches, which rely on the theoretical thresholds for making distinctions, and statistical approaches, which all use the distribution of respondents to separate categories (Denk & Christensen, 2016). While the former approach may provide a closer fit to the theoretical typology, it requires that the researcher makes crucial choices about setting cut-off values and determining what to do with unclear cases. The statistical approaches do not necessarily reflect the theoretical typology as faithfully, but they provide independent distinctions between the categories. In practice, the differences are often small, but it is nonetheless important to consider what tools to use and discuss the different possibilities.

In *The Civic Culture*, Almond and Verba use a set-theoretic approach to separate different categories. At the time, this was in practice the only feasible option due to the lack of widespread powerful computers and statistical software packages. Similar methods are still used today, but statistical techniques have become the norm, mainly because the results are considered more objective. There are several statistical methods available for these purposes, including factor analysis, cluster analysis and latent class analysis.

To operationalize the typology outlined above, I opted for a two-step strategy (Christensen, 2016a). I first used confirmatory factor analysis to confirm that the manifest indicators as expected formed the two latent dimensions. Confirmatory analysis allowed me to test the proposition that the indicators as hypothesized load onto two distinct dimensions (Brown, 2006). Following the successful outcome of this, I used cluster analysis to classify respondents according to their scores on the four indicators. Cluster analysis is an exploratory technique that group respondents into non-overlapping categories based on the selected indicators (Aldenderfer, 1985). It made it possible to distinguish whether respondents combined values on the indicators in accordance with the proposed typology. The cluster analysis showed that the respondents as expected could be grouped into four categories with attitudinal traits that corresponded to the theoretical classification. This confirmed that the theoretical typology is a reliable tool to use in empirical research.

A common critique against this approach is that by classifying respondents based on continuous variables, you lose a lot of information contained in the intermediate values. However, this drawback is compensated by the new insights that are on offer when focusing on kinds rather than degree.

New Insights

2019 SAGE Publications, Ltd

Having established the empirical relevance of the typology, the next step is to examine the causes and consequences of the categorization. The typology can be used both as a dependent variable, where the aim is to understand why people belong to certain categories, or it can be conceived as an independent variable when the aim is to explore what belonging to the different categories entails for how people behave in various situations, for example, with regards to political participation.

In my own research, I have shown that there are considerable differences in how widespread these different attitudinal profiles are in Europe (Denk et al., 2015). Contrary to the common expectation, we find little evidence of convergence to a single type of citizen. Furthermore, while dissatisfaction is widespread in most European democracies, there are important differences in what type of citizen is dominant. Somewhat worrying, the more problematic forms of political dissatisfaction seems to be more widespread in newer democracies, which could indicate that these are less consolidated than what we like to think.

I also explored the relationship between the typology and different forms of political participation (Christensen, 2016a, 2016b). This research is linked to the aforementioned debate concerning the link between political dissatisfaction and the functioning of democracy, where some claim that skeptical attitudes toward authorities are beneficial for democracy since critical citizens hold politicians accountable for their actions by involvement in unconventional political activities such as protesting (Dalton, 2004; Inglehart, 1997; Norris, 1999). Others reject this view and hold that political dissatisfaction constitutes a threat to democracy since dissatisfied citizens are disenchanted with politics altogether and have lost hope that it is possible to enhance their life situation through political action (Hay, 2007; Stoker, 2006). By using a typological approach, it is possible to show that both are right, since it is necessary to distinguish different types of dissatisfaction. The Type 3 outlined above is indeed the category most likely to demonstrate, whereas Types 2 and 4 are less likely to engage in protest activities. Interestingly, this also means that Type 1, which consists of ostensibly satisfied citizens, also has a participation rate above the average, meaning demonstrating is not necessarily a protest against authorities.

Another study showed that institutional power-sharing, which is often seen as a way to promote benevolent political attitudes, has different implications for different types of dissatisfaction (Christensen, 2015). By examining the links between power-sharing mechanisms and the typology, it was possible to show that power sharing may increase the share of satisfied citizens, but it can also boost the occurrence of some types of dissatisfaction. Since institutional power sharing obscures who is responsible for political decisions, there is a risk that people lose faith in their ability to comprehend political matters and as a result fall into the Type 2-category. Although power sharing may thus be beneficial for political legitimacy, there are important trade-offs that need to be acknowledged.

While these findings are by no means definitive, they show that it is possible to gain new insights by using typologies as a complement to traditional approaches.

Conclusion

2019 SAGE Publications, Ltd

Although an important part of early studies in comparative attitudinal research, the use of typologies in comparative research fell out of fashion in contemporary research. Nevertheless, there are good reasons to consider typologies as a viable approach. Although it entails some challenges, it can deliver new insights into old debates.

Exercises and Discussion Questions

1. What advantages can a typological approach provide?
 2. How do you decide how to demarcate different categories in a typology?
 3. What is the best way to empirically operationalize a theoretical typology?
 4. What possible trade-offs may need to be made when selecting data?
 5. What types of political dissatisfaction do we find in contemporary democracies and what are their implications for democracy?
-

Further Readings

Almond, G. A., & Verba, S. (1963). *The civic culture: Political attitudes and democracy in five nations*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Bailey, K. D. (1994). *Typologies and taxonomies: An introduction to classification techniques*. London, England: SAGE.

Gerring, J. (2012). *Social science methodology: A unified framework*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Goertz, G. (2005). *Social science concepts: A user's guide*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

van de Vijver, F., & Leung, K. (1997). *Methods and data analysis for cross-cultural research*. London, England: SAGE.

References

Abdelzadeh, A., & Ekman, J. (2012). Understanding critical citizenship and other forms of public dissatisfaction: An alternative framework. *Politics, Culture and Socialization*, 3, 179–196.

Aldenderfer, M. S. (1985). *Cluster analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Almond, G. A., & Verba, S. (1963). *The civic culture: Political attitudes and democracy in five nations*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

2019 SAGE Publications, Ltd

Amnå, E., & Ekman, J. (2014). Standby citizens: Diverse faces of political passivity. *European Political Science Review*, 6, 261–281.

Brown, T. A. (2006). *Confirmatory factor analysis for applied research*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Christensen, H. S. (2015). Power sharing and political dissatisfaction: A multilevel analysis of the link between power-sharing institutions and kinds of political dissatisfaction in 24 European democracies. *European Politics and Society*, 16, 280–300.

Christensen, H. S. (2016a). All the same? Examining the link between three kinds of political dissatisfaction and protest. *Comparative European Politics*, 14, 781–801.

Christensen, H. S. (2016b). Political dissatisfactions and citizen involvement: Political participation in Europe during the early stages of the economic crisis. *Partecipazione E Conflitto*, 9, 19–45.

Dalton, R. J. (2004). *Democratic challenges, democratic choices*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Dalton, R. J., & Welzel, C. (2014). *The civic culture transformed: From allegiant to assertive citizens* (R. J. Dalton & C. Welzel, Eds.). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Denk, T., & Christensen, H. S. (2016). How to classify political cultures? A comparison of three methods of classification. *Quality & Quantity*, 50, 177–191.

Denk, T., Christensen, H. S., & Bergh, D. (2015). The composition of political culture—A study of 25 European democracies. *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 50, 358–377.

Easton, D. (1965). *A systems analysis of political life*. New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Geissel, B. (2008). Reflections and findings on the critical citizen: Civic education—What for? *European Journal of Political Research*, 47, 34–63.

Hay, C. (2007). *Why we hate politics*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Inglehart, R. (1997). *Modernization and postmodernization: Cultural, economic, and political change in 43 societies*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Norris, P. (1999). *Critical citizens: Global support for democratic government* (P. Norris, Ed.). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Norris, P. (2011). *Democratic deficit: Critical citizens revisited*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Stoker, G. (2006). *Why politics matters: Making democracy work*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.