

## Sidney Verba: An Intellectual Biography

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It is common practice to divide the study of politics into two—normative and empirical; then into three—American, comparative, and international; then into two again—substantive and methodological; then into two yet again—micro vs. macro; and having defined this  $2 \times 3 \times 2 \times 2$  disciplinary matrix, we then tell graduate students to specialize. It is, most obviously, the rare distinction of Sidney Verba to have made fundamental contributions in very nearly every location in this 24-cell disciplinary matrix.

He has, to call only part of the roll, published work of the highest quality on the comparative study of political cultures and democratic stability (Almond and Verba 1963); assumptions of rationality in models of the international system (Verba 1961a); the forms, sources, and consequences of political participation (Verba and Nie 1972; Verba, Nie, and Kim 1978; Verba, Schlozman, Brady, and Nie 1993a); the structure of public opinion and the character of voting (Nie, Verba, and Petrocik 1976); the connection between personal experience and political discontent (Schlozman and Verba 1979); the role of small groups and social influence in shaping political behavior (Verba 1961b); political mobilization and the representation of group interests (Verba, Schlozman, Brady, and Nie 1993b); and complementarities and comparative advantages of quantitative and qualitative methods (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994).

Given all this, it would surely be appropriate to take the central features of Sidney Verba's work to be the sheer reach and variety of his analytical arguments and empirical



Sidney Verba

findings, together with the singular craft and elegance with which he has written them up. I am sympathetic to this view, but I want to take this occasion to advance a different interpretation. Precisely what is remarkable about the range and diversity of Verba's research contributions, I want to argue, is the deeper coherence they possess, the way they fit together as integral parts of a larger project. That project I take to be nothing less than the development of an empirical democratic theory. To state my own view of the matter as directly as I can, Sidney Verba stands alongside Robert Dahl as a pre-eminent contributor in modern political science to a systematic, informed, and critical understanding of democratic theory and practice.

Sidney's work is also distinctive in a second respect. Obviously, only a small number of political scientists have written works that have had a major impact on the discipline, and a smaller number

still have written more than one such work. When I think of Sidney Verba, what comes first to my mind is a distinguished series of books, including *The Civic Culture*, *Participation in America*, and *The Changing American Voter*, each of which redefined its specific field of study. Sidney, author of multiple, major works, manifestly belongs to the select second group. But to frame the issue this way is, I think, to miss the point. What most deserves to be remarked about Sidney's work is that, while maintaining its range and pace, it has over time acquired a centrality of focus and a depth of argument that sets it apart in the quantitative study of politics. To drive this point home, I propose to make use of a rhetorical device and draw a contrast between the first wave of Sidney's work ending with *The Changing American Voter* and the second wave, which very much includes not only the work he has subsequently published but the seminal study of political participation on which he is presently working. To underline the progress of his work I want to concentrate on the career of one particular theme in the larger body of his work: a theme that by sustained reflection and empirical inquiry he has made distinctively his own. That theme is the centrality of politics itself to a proper understanding of the political beliefs and behavior of both ordinary citizens and leadership elites.

I propose to proceed in three steps. I want to comment first on some of the principal works of Sidney's first and best known wave of research, then discuss some of the major works of his quite extraordi-

nary second wave, and conclude with some remarks about his overall intellectual style, which deserves attention in its own right, I believe, independent of the specific contributions of any of his many studies.

## I.

Sidney's first major work, *Small Groups and Political Behavior*, manifestly differs from his subsequent work on multiple dimensions. It is very much a work of the library rather than of field research; qualitative rather than quantitative; cast in the vocabulary and centered on the research of social psychologists rather than of political scientists; reliant methodologically on experimental design and randomized manipulations in the laboratory rather than standardized interviews with representative samples; above all, focused on the interactions of people in the context of face-to-face groups rather than aggregations of individuals selected to represent the central tendencies of geographic areas or political cultures, each individual observed independently of each other.

These differences notwithstanding, a fair reading of *Small Groups and Political Behavior* will reveal the roots of Sidney's career-long concerns. I do not at all mean that one can find there, in capsule form as it were, the principal arguments he would go on to make, as though his subsequent career has consisted chiefly in a long-drawn-out effort to appreciate the logical consequences of his initial convictions. On the contrary, the burden of my argument is that the emergence of a new orientation to his subject matter is precisely the outstanding characteristic of his work. But the materials and concerns he was to draw upon to achieve this are evident in the normative, if not the analytical, preoccupations that comprise the core of his first book. I am of course thinking of the classic chapter on leadership and the norms of the group. It presents an original and nuanced discussion of a fundamental, yet frequently overlooked, dilemma of political leader-

ship. An effective leader must simultaneously conform to the norms of the group to maintain standing, yet deviate from them to innovate. Verba's discussion of this dilemma, I would emphasize, is very much worth reading—and rereading—in its own right, but the point I mean to make here is that one can see the first consideration of his career-long reflection on the crucial themes of the roles of citizens, the responsibilities of leadership, and the dilemmas of political representation.

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With his second book, Verba moved to the center of the arena he has, together with Phil Converse, dominated ever since—large-scale survey research. *The Civic Culture*, conceived and written together with Gabriel Almond, is social science on the largest scale: a study of the political cultures of five countries—the United States, England, Mexico, Germany, and Italy—distinct in language (the first two arguably aside), institutional structure, historical experience, and level of economic development. It is invariably, and quite rightly, remarked that *The Civic Culture* is outsized in its theoretical ambition to identify the constituent elements of the political culture consistent with stability in contemporary liberal democracies. *The Civic Culture* is also outsized in its empirical reach. Having myself had a hand in designing original public opinion surveys, I can vouch for the labor involved, and if one will only make the effort to recall the limited facilities available when questionnaires were being designed, samples collected, and interviews conducted more than three decades ago, it will be immediately apparent that *The*

*Civic Culture* stands as enduring witness to the dedication of Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba to scholarship. Their work initiated a stream of subsequent research comparable in volume to two of the other classics of mid-twentieth century social science, *The Authoritarian Personality* and *Communism, Conformity and Civil Liberties*. But my interest lies in the career of Sidney Verba, not in that of his works, so I look at *The Civic Culture* to map Verba's intellectual trajectory.

Consider the terms in which Almond and Verba cast their explanatory framework. The causal factors they feature include interpersonal relations within the family, the school, and on the job, as indexed by early participation in family decisions; freedom to take part in school discussions and debates; and the extent to which they are consulted about decisions at work; and a selection of demographic attributes, among them age and education. The causal storyline of *The Civic Culture* is socialization, and without ignoring the impact of experiences later in life (such as participation in voluntary organizations), the explanatory emphasis of Almond and Verba is very much on the formative impact of early experiences on the political orientations and subjective competence of citizens. To put this point in broader terms, on the one hand, what distinguishes both *The Civic Culture* and *Small Groups and Political Behavior* is an effort to move beyond merely documenting empirical regularities and reach toward a genuinely theoretical account of socially and politically significant problems. On the other hand, what is distinctive about this theoretical project is the extent to which it represents a decision to move outside political science and to take as the model for theory leading arguments in sociology and social psychology, above all, Parsonian structural-functionalism. Viewed from this pan-social science perspective, political science is reduced to a sub-case, an applied discipline, distinctive perhaps in its subject matter but derivative in its fundamental explanatory framework.

*Participation in America*, co-authored with Norman Nie and winner of the Gladys Kammerer Prize awarded for the best book on American politics, marks a closer engagement with politics as a domain of activity that needs to be understood in its own terms. Most obviously, one can point to the innovative investigation of the concurrence of the views of ordinary citizens and community leaders, where concurrence is defined in both the relative priorities of public issues and the particular positions taken on them. Additionally, there is the typological analysis of the modes of political participation in the course of which Nie and Verba explore the sources, correlates, and consequences of campaign participation, communal activity, voting, and particularized contacts as forms of citizen engagement in politics, and as well their initial exploration of the role of political parties in shaping political participation. Yet, all of this duly acknowledged, one must also recognize that the explanatory center of gravity very much remains sociological, with readiness to take part in public affairs accounted for in terms of socioeconomic status (SES).

A concern with SES is not inappropriate—who would want to argue that a concern with class is proof of an indifference to politics? Rather it is that a sense of how politics works can help disclose how class works to shape the political ideas and conduct of citizens.

The centrality of politics for the understanding of the political beliefs and conduct of citizens constitutes the driving theme of *The Changing American Voter*, co-authored with Norman Nie and John Petrocik and winner of the Woodrow Wilson prize awarded for the best book in political science taking account of all fields. There are cynics who believe that the first step that the field of public opinion and voting took was also its last. Certainly, the classic first step—*The American Voter*, by Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes—was a giant step. In ways both large and small, *The American Voter* has dominated subsequent research on the nature of public opinion and the

dynamics of presidential voting. The only work comparable in empirical scope and analytical ambitiousness is *The Changing American Voter*, and its overarching argument accordingly deserves particular attention.

Acknowledging both their intellectual indebtedness to *The American Voter* and the many continuing points of similarity between the two works, Verba and his collaborators nonetheless draw a contrast between the Michigan approach and theirs on three dimensions. Causally, the Michigan approach is social-psychological in cast, with its emphasis on the rootedness of fundamental political attitudes in early socialization in the family and school. Temporally, it is a story not of fixity but of continuity, both within and across political generations. Politically, it is an account of a particular, limited, and not necessarily representative era of American politics—the decade of the 1950s and the Eisenhower presidency. By contrast, Verba and his colleagues intend their approach to be political rather than social-psychological, to accent change rather than continuity, and to underline the variety rather than the uniformity of political eras.

Focusing on the mass public, Verba and his colleagues develop two contrasting portraits. Summarizing the findings of the classical studies of public opinion, they point to the principal features of the American public in the 1950s: minimally interested, attentive, and (apart from voting) active in politics; unsophisticated in their views of political matters in general, unable to master and make use of overarching master-perspectives on politics; and inconsistent, in consequence, in the positions they take across a range of issues.

Citizens, unengaged by the issues of their time, take their cue, at any rate so far as its politically most consequential choice is concerned, from their long-term partisan commitment, a commitment grounded in their early learning and sense of social identity. Centered in their own immediate lives, disengaged from the issues and controversies of public life, they are satisfied

with their political system and institutions, confident of the competence and trustworthiness of public officials, confident also of their own power to have a say.

By contrast, *The Changing American Voter* offers a new portrait of the general public, one that accents marked, even fundamental changes. On its account, the once-binding ties of partisanship, though still manifest, have visibly frayed, particularly among the youngest political generation. New issues have come to the fore, particularly race, Vietnam, crime, and drugs. Citizens in significant numbers, moreover, are changing not only what they are thinking about politically but how they are thinking about it, more often framing it in ideological or near-ideological terms and more thoroughly and consistently organizing their positions across an extended array of political issues. This argument has proven controversial, and the last element in particular—the consistency thesis—has come under close scrutiny. For my own part, I am of two minds about the reaction to *The Changing American Voter*. On the one hand, the critical examinations by Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus (1978) and Bishop, Tuchfarber, and Oldendick (1978) are models of exact and innovative methodological assessments. On the other hand, the methodological response to *The Changing American Voter*, imaginative and helpful as it has been, has not really engaged the larger arguments of the work, and these larger arguments—and particularly the need to understand the responses of mass publics in the context of political issues as these issues are structured for them by parties and candidates—have moved the field forward fundamentally.

## II.

The principal themes had all made their entrance by the end of the first wave of work, and the thematic continuity across works so diverse substantively and comparatively was striking. Whether the subject was the orientations of citi-



zen to public affairs, their participation in politics, or the nature of their thinking about political issues, and whether the focus was on a single country or on five, each work formed a part of a continuing engagement with a set of core concerns at once normative and substantive. Chief among these concerns was pluralism as a theory of political representation and the constraints socioeconomic inequality imposes on democratic practice. With this first wave of work, Sidney had distinguished himself in his generation. Yet what was truly to set him apart was that, having won the principal honors of his profession—the Gladys Kammerer Award for the Best Book on American National Policy (1972) and the Woodrow Wilson Award for the Best Book in Political Science (1976)—he then embarked on a second wave of work, more deeply considered, further reaching, and more imaginative than the first.

I mean to underline the deepening of Sidney's arguments, choosing for particular emphasis his advances on three fronts—the politics of equality, the connection between personal experience and political demand, and the problem of political participation. I want to start with the politics of equality to underline Verba's distinctive engagement with the content of politics as a condition of understanding citizens' responses to politics, and begin by contrasting it with the central tendency of concurrent studies of public opinion and politics.

I would select as the primary features of the dominant perspective on public opinion through the seventies and eighties the minimal levels of attention ordinary citizens pay to politics and the minimal levels of information they accordingly possess about it. From this perspective it seemed to follow quite naturally, even self-evidently, that the views of mass publics on issues of public affairs tended to be superficial, often illogical or at any rate in ideological disarray, and remarkably changeable: indeed, on some issues so much so as to suggest that a great many people had not even formed a genuine attitude in the first place.

But in a world where the ordinary citizen knows and cares so little about public affairs, politics itself tends to disappear. The task of the public opinion analyst is not to give an account of how citizens engage the issues of the day but rather to emphasize that they are unlikely to have given them much thought. Political issues and political argument, given this orientation, tend to be pushed to the margins of the study of public opinion and politics. In contrast, Verba and

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his colleagues have attempted to recover the heart of politics itself as a subject for study by political scientists, taking as their subject in a remarkable pair of studies one of the master ideas of politics: equality.

*Elites and the Idea of Equality* and *Equality in America* offer a hall of mirrors capturing reflections of the many faces of equality as a political idea. Some of these reflections are familiar, though not for this reason less important. Others, however, are fresh and for this reason uncommonly arresting. I am thinking particularly of the assessment of income inequality, where each respondent is first asked what a particular group (executives, for example) earn, then what they should earn. As Verba and his col-

leagues demonstrate, given estimates of perceived and of fair earnings across occupational groups, standards of fairness and of the acceptability of inequalities otherwise invisible can be conclusively revealed.

*Injury to Insult*, written with Kay Schlozman, approaches the larger problem of politics and economic disadvantage from a quite different angle. It takes as its central problem the relation between suffering economic disadvantage and becoming politically mobilized. *Injury to Insult* is a fascinating and politically relevant work just because it drives home the (increasing) strength of the boundaries between the personal and the public. By focusing on key elements of the American Dream—for example, the belief that hard work is the most important factor in getting ahead and that the chances for success are distributed fairly—and examining their hold on Americans across class and race, Schlozman and Verba reveal some of the chief barriers to the translation of economic grievance into political discontent. In the process—above all, in their disclosure of an *inverse* relation between belief in the American Dream and occupational level among Blacks—they may have unveiled one of the most potent, and perverse, dynamics of the issue that goes deepest in American politics: race. *Injury to Insult* is my intellectual favorite of Sidney's work. It is, I trust, not inappropriate to express a personal preference in this instance because an aspect of this work—the connection between personal economic problems and political demands—has been a focus of part of my own work with Richard A. Brody, and what I am specially positioned to testify to is how much deeper their inquiry has gone than ours.

Political participation is the third front on which Sidney has, by emphasizing the centrality of politics to an understanding of political belief and behavior, strikingly deepened his argument. In *Participation and Political Equality*, Sidney, together with Norman Nie and Jae-On Kim, breaks out on two dimensions. The first is comparative, but on an

exceptional scale—seven nations in all: Japan, India, Austria, the Netherlands, Nigeria, Yugoslavia, and the United States. The second dimension is analytical. The relation between socioeconomic level and political participation, from the perspective of Sidney's first wave of work, is to be seen as a primary factor accounting for the character of a country's politics. However, the same relation, from the perspective of his second wave, is itself to be understood as conditioned by the character of a country's social and political institutions. Thus, Verba, Nie, and Kim introduce the quite productive distinction between individual-based and group-based inequalities in participation, and, still more ambitiously, explore the extent to which the impact of socioeconomic inequalities can be tempered by strong institutional structures, such as political parties or even non-political organizations.

If the story of Sidney's reconsideration of political participation were to end here, it would be a full-length story. But Sidney is in the middle of the most ambitious study of his career. Together with Kay Schlozman and Henry Brady, and relying on a quite extraordinary sample of the politically active, Sidney starts by asking why people do not participate. In response, they offer three simple reasons: "because they can't; because they don't want to; or because nobody asked."

They go on to elaborate each of these in a theoretically rich fashion: "They can't" suggests a paucity of necessary resources: *time* to take part in political activity, *money* to make contributions, and *civic skills*—by which they mean those communications and organizational skills that facilitate effective participation. "They don't want to" focuses on the absence of psychological engagement with politics—a lack of interest in politics, minimal concern with public issues, a sense that activity makes no difference, and no consciousness of membership in a group with shared political interests. "Nobody asked" implies isolation from the recruitment net-

works through which citizens are mobilized to politics (1993a; 1993b).

Developing this "resources" model, they show how different activities require different resources, partly in ways that are familiar—political contributions, for example, obviously covary with income—but more fundamentally in ways that are not. Thus, Sidney and his collaborators show that civic skills, on which campaign work and community involvement rest, are learned through adult involvements in church, in nonpolitical organizations, and on the job. Civic skills, then, become a key mechanism integrating social and political life, with religious institutions, for example, not only imparting participatory skills but also serving as sites where people get asked to become involved in politics; this is an aspect of political involvement crucial for those with low SES. Their "resource model" represents a strikingly new tack, and, making all the usual and appropriate allowances for work in progress, I believe this new study of political participation by Sidney, Kay, and Henry will be, in both reach and originality, the capstone of Sidney's career.

### III.

It is not enough, if one wants a genuine appreciation of Sidney's research accomplishments, to review the substantive findings of his research program: it would not be enough, however comprehensive and detailed the review, because it would ignore his singular intellectual style. Many others—above all, those who have the good fortune to work alongside him—could provide a far more telling intellectual portrait than I. But having committed myself to the same research vocation as he—large-scale survey research—there are features of his intellectual style whose distinctiveness and value I am specially positioned to appreciate.

Most obviously, Sidney has a unique gift for analytic narrative. The metaphor implicit here—between survey researcher and novelist—may strike some readers as

inapt. If so, they would have missed a vital part of what makes Sidney's books singular: they are narratives of ideas. Consistent with this, Sidney has developed a trademark expository practice of relating—of narrating—a complex theoretical argument, first breaking it down into a series of argument-defining expectations, each illustratively captured with an artfully simplified graph or figure, then, with the analytical plot established, reviewing the quantitative evidence closely and in detail.

The result is a capacity to develop an argument of uncommon complexity, step by step and in as much empirical detail as necessary, without sacrificing or obscuring the larger causal—and political—themes that tie the separate parts together and drive the larger argument. Others in quantitative political science have a gift for narrative, can embed statistical results in a larger story that informs and motivates them, but not many, and then—almost without exception—only in the form of an article. I am not aware of a contemporary social scientist, writing at full length, with a capacity to organize and convey complex quantitative results with comparable expository flair and analytical force.

It would be a mistake to regard this gift for exposition merely as a byproduct of an exceptional fluency at writing, although it would be a bigger mistake still to slight the analytical and expository craft Sidney has developed through the practice of his vocation. But, to push the analogy between novelist and social scientist a step further, what gives a special character to Sidney's books is the extent to which they are, in conception and not merely in analysis, genuine works of imagination. Because of the staggering cost of survey research, without anyone intending it, indeed, with hardly anyone wishing it, both what is measured and how it is measured have become routinized, the National Election Studies being the paradigmatic example in political science, the General Social Survey in sociology. Sidney's work could not stand in more dramatic contrast. Each of the major works

of his second wave offers a freshly conceived world: new variables like new characters in a story, or old ones assessed in new ways revealing previously unglimped aspects of their character. In a field of study where imagination has often seemed to consist in being clever after the fact through complex quantitative analysis, it is difficult to exaggerate the inventiveness Sidney has displayed in the design of his studies, above all, in the second wave of his work where each of his major studies departs in decisive ways not just from the studies others have done but from those he has himself done. I am not aware of another figure in survey research who has shown a comparable measure of creativity in conception, study after study.

A third feature of Sidney's intellectual style is its normative component. It is an unmistakable aspect of the narrative of ideas he relates. All his work, early or late, testifies to his continuing preoccupation with the problematic connection, in life and not merely in political theory, between political representation in contemporary democracies and the needs and aspirations of those who are badly off, whether they are badly off because of their economic circumstances or because of their color, gender, or caste. The relation between normative and empirical, between fact and value, is more complex than usually acknowledged, and my own view of it, having reviewed Sidney's work in detail, is that each of his works, considered both in overall argument and in operational detail, would not be as they are, and would be less than they are, but for their normative component.

A final element of intellectual style, and surely the most obvious of them all, is Sidney's gift for collegiality. His research is a testimonial to it. A partial list of his collaborators, proceeding alphabetically, includes Gabriel Almond, Henry Brady, Robert Keohane, Jae-On Kim, Gary King, Norman Nie, Gary Orren, John Petrocik, Bing Powell, Ken Prewitt, Kay Schlozman, and Goldie Shabad. Viewed from the outside, political scientists who practice approaches

other than survey research may, to borrow a phrase from Michael Kammen, view it as "a machine that would go of itself." Nothing could be further from the truth. The very strength of survey research methodologically—that decisions on measurement must be made explicitly and in advance of collecting data—can be a nightmare organizationally, while the very scale of the research undertaking as a whole does not exactly work to extinguish

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the individual ambitions of the researchers undertaking it. I have myself not worked with Sidney Verba, but I know many who have, and without exception they testify to his empathy, humor, loyalty, and absolute decency—in a word, to his gift for friendship, which cannot be unrelated to his commitment to citizenship both as a subject for study and as a focus of his life in the university and outside it. The work mirrors the man. Sidney Verba, winner of the James Madison Award for distinguished contribution in political science and now president of the American Political Science Association—in honoring both the man and the work, we honor what is best both in ourselves and in our vocation.

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