

Unit 8: Political Culture

Political Culture is the set of shared attitudes, beliefs, values, and orientations that shape how a society views political authority, governance, and their own role within the political system. Think of it as the invisible psychological framework behind the visible laws and structures of a country. While a constitution dictates how a government *should* run on paper, the political culture determines how it *actually* operates in practice. It explains why the same model of government can succeed in one nation but struggle in another.

1. The Nature of Political Culture

To understand its nature, it helps to look at its core characteristics:

- **Deeply Embedded but Dynamic:** Political culture is formed over generations through a process called *political socialization* (passed down via families, schools, religious institutions, and historical events). It is highly stable, but it can shift gradually over time or abruptly following a major crisis (e.g., a revolution, economic collapse, or pandemic).
- **Subjective and Psychological:** It does not focus on objective facts, but rather on people's *perceptions* of facts. It's about whether citizens trust their leaders, feel powerless, or believe the system is inherently fair.
- **Pluralistic (Subcultures):** Rarely is a political culture entirely uniform. Within any nation, distinct political subcultures exist based on region, ethnicity, socio-economic class, or generation. For instance, rural communities may view federal authority very differently than urban centers.

2. The Classic Types of Political Culture

In political science, the foundational framework for analyzing political culture comes from Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba (*The Civic Culture*). They identified three pure types based on how aware citizens are of their government and how much they participate in it:

A. Parochial Political Culture

- **The Dynamic:** Citizens have low awareness of the central government and low expectations of it. They do not see themselves as having any power to change political realities.
- **Where it's found:** Often in traditional, tribal, or highly decentralized societies where local, informal, or kinship-based authority structures matter far more to daily life than distant national policies.
- **Citizen Mindset:** "*The government in the capital has nothing to do with my daily survival.*"

B. Subject Political Culture

- **The Dynamic:** Citizens are highly aware of the central government, its laws, and its enforcement power, but they are expected to be passive. They obey the rules but have little to no avenues for meaningful political participation or influence.
- **Where it's found:** Common in authoritarian regimes, absolute monarchies, or highly centralized, top-down bureaucratic states.

- **Citizen Mindset:** *"I understand the laws and must obey them, but I have no power to change who is in charge."*

C. Participant Political Culture

- **The Dynamic:** Citizens are highly aware of the political system and actively engage with it. They believe that their input matters, that they can influence decision-making, and that the government should be held accountable to them.
- **Where it's found:** The hallmark of mature, stable democracies.
- **Citizen Mindset:** *"It is my right and duty to vote, protest, or speak out to shape the laws of this country."*

The Civic Culture Mix: In reality, no country is a pure 100% match for just one type. Almond and Verba argued that the most stable democracies possess a "**Civic Culture**"—a healthy blend where participant behaviors dominate, but enough subject and parochial orientations exist to maintain respect for law, authority, and local tradition without overwhelming the system with constant political conflict.

3. The Roles of Political Culture

Political culture isn't just an abstract academic concept; it performs vital functions that keep a society functioning (or cause it to fracture):

- **Legitimizing the Political System:** It acts as the cement that holds institutions together. If a political culture values democratic norms, citizens will accept the outcome of an election even if their preferred candidate loses. Without this cultural buy-in, laws lose their moral authority and must be enforced by raw power or coercion.
- **Shaping Political Behavior:** It dictates what is considered acceptable or unacceptable political behavior. For example, in a political culture with a high tolerance for patronage or informal favoritism, citizens might view navigating personal connections as a standard way to get things done, whereas the same behavior would trigger intense public outrage in a culture that strictly prizes formal bureaucratic transparency.
- **Defining the Scope of Government:** It sets the boundaries for what the state *should* be doing. For instance, some national cultures strongly value individualism and expect minimal government intervention in daily life, while others favor collectivism and expect the state to provide robust social safety nets.
- **Aiding or Resisting Stability:** When a government's formal structures align with the underlying political culture, the nation is stable. When there is a mismatch—such as trying to impose a highly centralized, formal institutional model onto a deeply fragmented, localized, or traditional political culture—the system often experiences high friction, institutional gridlock, or instability.

Impact of Political Cultures

When a formal, modern constitutional framework is introduced to a society with deep-rooted traditional governance systems—such as kinship networks, tribal structures, or informal patronage—they don't simply replace the old ways. Instead, they collide, overlap, and adapt to one another. In political science, this creates a **hybrid political culture** or what scholars call a "**dual legitimacy**" system. The formal constitution holds legal authority on paper, but traditional, informal systems hold moral and social authority in daily life.

1. The Mechanisms of Interaction

When these two systems meet, the interaction generally falls into one of three patterns:

MODELS OF INTERACTION		
COMPLEMENTARY	ACCOMMODATING	CONFLICTUAL
Systems work together to fill governance gaps.	Formal rules are adapted to fit local realities.	The two systems actively fight for authority.

A. Complementary Interaction

In many vast or developing nations, the formal state lacks the reach or resources to enforce laws, run courts, or provide social safety nets everywhere. Traditional systems step into this vacuum.

- **Local Conflict Resolution:** Land disputes or local grievances are often settled by elders, chiefs, or community mediators using customary law rather than taking up the time and expense of formal magistrate courts.
- **Social Safety Nets:** When formal state welfare, unemployment benefits, or public childcare don't exist, traditional kinship networks act as an informal insurance policy, ensuring that resources are shared so no single family starves.

B. Accommodating Interaction (Hybridity)

Instead of fighting the formal system, traditional actors often learn to speak its language, embedding themselves within modern democratic institutions to maintain their influence.

- **The Rise of Patronage Politics:** Democratic elections require votes. In a kinship-driven culture, a candidate wins votes not by publishing a policy platform, but by leveraging their kinship obligations. Once elected to a formal seat, they are culturally expected to redirect state resources back to their community, turning public funds into traditional patronage.
- **Formalizing the Informal:** Some constitutions explicitly carve out space for traditional authority. For example, countries like Botswana (with the *Ntlo ya Dikgosi*)

or Vanuatu (with the *Malvatumauri*) have formal, constitutional houses of chiefs to advise the government on customary matters.

C. Conflictual Interaction

This happens when the core values of a modern constitution directly contradict the core values of traditional culture, creating systemic friction.

- **Meritocracy vs. Kinship Obligations:** Modern bureaucracies are designed to run on strict merit, transparency, and impersonal rules. However, an official working within that system faces intense cultural pressure to favor their kin. To the constitution, this is nepotism or corruption; to the traditional culture, turning your back on family is a profound moral failure.
- **Universal Human Rights vs. Customary Law:** Constitutional frameworks guarantee individual rights, gender equality, and social inclusion. Traditional customary systems, however, are often deeply patriarchal or collectivist, prioritizing the harmony of the group over individual freedom, which can lead to friction over issues like women's leadership, land inheritance, or minority rights.

2. The Operational Impacts on Governance

When a state operates under these dual systems, it changes the entire nature of administration:

Governance Dimension	Formal Constitutional Ideal	The Informal Reality	The Systemic Result
Authority	Institutional (The Office)	Personal/Kinship (The Lineage)	Power attaches to <i>who</i> you are, not the <i>office</i> you hold.
Resource Allocation	Public Need & Policy	Reciprocity & Patronage	Budgets are fragmented to satisfy competing group loyalties.
Law Enforcement	Statutory Law & Courts	Customary Consensus	Parallel legal systems create "cracks" and jurisdictional confusion.

For our noting, when we try to eliminate traditional systems by passing stricter formal laws, will not work out because informal networks are built on genuine human trust and generational identity, they are incredibly resilient. True institutional stability only happens when formal laws are designed to mindfully bridge the gap—respecting the cultural reality of traditional structures while firmly safeguarding universal human rights and administrative transparency.

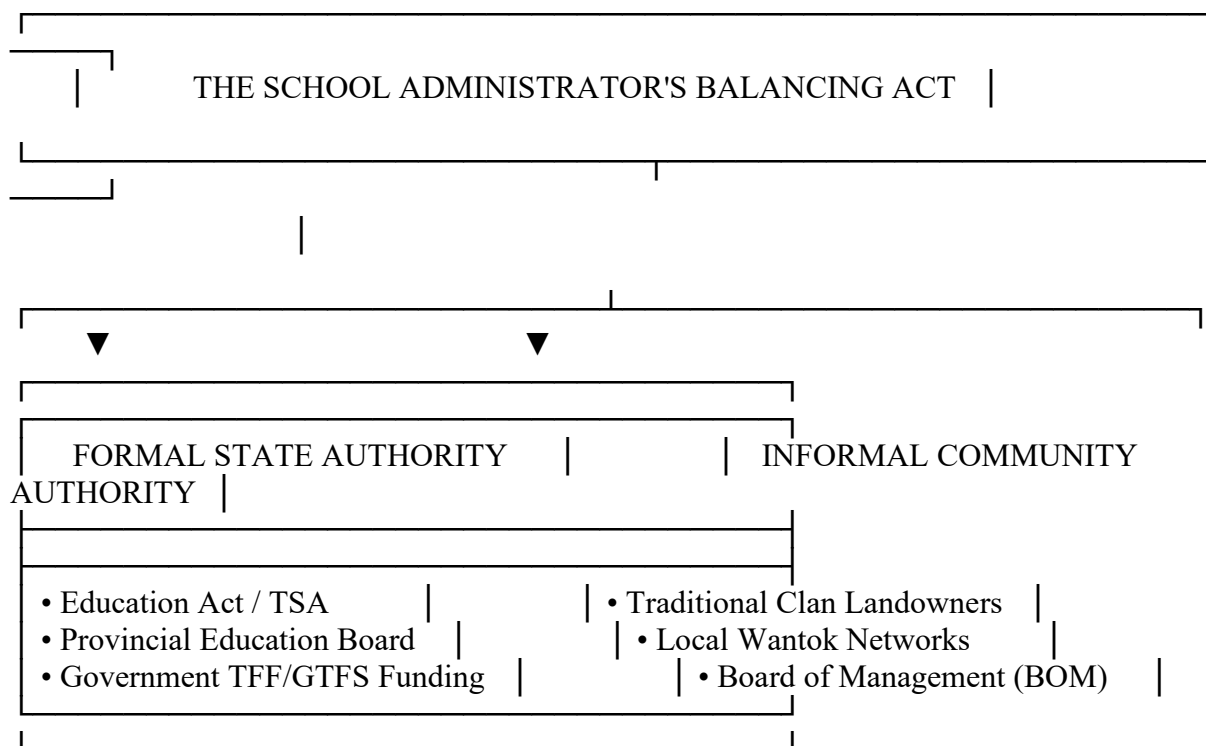
Application in the Education Context

In the Papua New Guinea education system, the collision between formal constitutional structures and informal traditional governance is not an abstract theory—it is a daily operational reality for school administrators. PNG’s education system runs on a model of **decentralization**. On paper, the *Education Act* and the *Teaching Service Act* draw clean lines of functional authority between national standards, provincial education boards (PEBs), and local Board of Management (BOM) structures.

In practice, this formal framework constantly intersects with the **wantok system** (the deeply rooted cultural network of kinship, language, and mutual obligation) and local political dynamics. Here is how this plays out inside school administration.

1. The Dual Legitimacy of School Governance

A PNG school administrator must constantly balance two distinct sources of authority, both of which hold massive leverage over whether a school succeeds or fails.



- **The Formal Track:** The principal answers to the Provincial Education Manager and the PEB for curriculum delivery, teacher attendance, and the spending of Government Tuition Fee Subsidy (GTFS) funds.
- **The Informal Track:** The school physically sits on clan-owned land. Without the backing of the local community, landowners, and the BOM, the school cannot guarantee safety, build infrastructure, or retain staff.

If a principal relies *only* on formal authority ("The Act says I am in charge"), they risk community boycotts or land disputes. If they lean *too far* into informal community demands, they risk violating public finance laws or provincial education policies.

2. Key Friction Points in School Administration

The intersection of these two systems creates specific, predictable challenges for school leaders as we can see from the three factors below.

A. The Politics of Teacher Appointments vs. Wantok Pressures

On paper, teacher appointments are governed strictly by merit, qualification, and suitability ratings set by the Teaching Service Commission (TSC) and the PEB.

- **The Customary Friction:** When a teaching post opens up, local leaders or BOM members often pressure the administrator or provincial officers to appoint a "local" teacher or a wantok, regardless of their official rating.
- **The Resulting "Cracks":** This creates institutional friction. If a highly qualified external teacher is appointed on merit, they may face a lack of cooperation or housing security from the local community. Conversely, if a wantok is appointed despite poor performance, the school administrator faces intense difficulty enforcing performance standards or tackling absenteeism, as disciplining a wantok can trigger a wider community backlash.

B. Gender Equality (GESI) Policies vs. Traditional Patriarchal Structures

The PNG government has a clear, progressive national framework for Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI), which mandates equal opportunities for female teachers and safe, inclusive learning environments for girls.

- **The Customary Friction:** Many rural communities operate under deeply traditional, patriarchal leadership models where public authority is historically held by men.
- **The Resulting "Cracks":** A female school administrator or a female teacher seeking a promotion to a leadership role (like Deputy Principal) may face resistance not from the formal Department of Education, but from the local BOM or community leaders who are uncomfortable taking directives from a woman. Administrators must navigate this carefully, using the protective language of GESI "School Rules" while finding culturally respectful ways to win community buy-in.

C. Financial Transparency vs. Communitarian Obligations

School GTFS funds and project allocations are strictly regulated by formal public finance management rules.

- **The Customary Friction:** In the traditional PNG political culture, a leader's status is determined by their generosity and how well they take care of their immediate group. When a school holds resources, local contractors, landowners, or wantoks expect to be favored for school maintenance, construction, or supply contracts.
- **The Resulting "Cracks":** The principal is caught in a vice. Rejecting local contractors in favor of a cheaper, more qualified external option keeps the formal auditors happy but can create severe local hostility. Accepting a suboptimal local bid to maintain peace can lead to project failure and administrative non-compliance.

3. Operational Impacts & The Administrative Reality

Administrative Dimension	Formal Policy Expectation	The Grassroots Reality	The Resulting Systemic Challenge
Staff Discipline	Clear penalties for absenteeism under the Teaching Service Act.	Kinship ties shield underperforming or absent staff from formal reports.	High rates of unchecked teacher absenteeism in remote schools.
Infrastructure	Built on designated school land via formal government tenders.	Land ownership disputes can halt construction instantly if clans feel left out.	Half-completed classrooms or frozen funding due to local land claims.
BOM Governance	Functions as an advisory and support body for school development.	Can be hijacked by local political factions to control school resources.	Gridlock between the Principal's professional vision and the Board's local agenda.

For our noting, successful school administration in PNG requires a high level of **cultural intelligence**. The most effective principals do not try to fight or ignore the wantok system or traditional structures; instead, they treat the community as a primary stakeholder. They use the formal rules as their baseline shield, but they spend significant energy building genuine relationships, ensuring transparent communication with the BOM, and framing formal educational goals in ways that align with local community pride and ownership.