

Professor Gabriel Almond

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American political scientist whose ideas encompassed the continents of the world

UNTIL Gabriel Almond came along, comparative politics usually meant country by country studies, and took in just a few nations, such as the United States, France, Germany and, latterly, the Soviet Union. Each was treated as a special case, with little regard for concepts and a lot of attention paid to detail. The focus was on constitutions and institutions. The behaviour of citizens was left to speculative psychology or *de haut en bas* generalisations. This was above all true of the study of the Englishness of English politics. Most of the world was ignored.

A half-century ago Almond became leader of a movement to develop concepts common to political systems across the world, including Africa, Asia and Latin America. This did not reflect a naive belief that people and politics were everywhere the same. The framework he developed in *The Politics of the Developing Areas* (1960) concentrated on common functions of politics — the recruitment of political leaders, the articulation and aggregation of interests, and the making, administration and enforcement of laws — which were dealt with differently in different parts of the world. The object was to identify what made one country's political system different from another — and what had to change in order for a country to develop a more effective government. The insights that Almond produced were applicable not only in newly independent countries but also in developed countries, as Richard Rose showed in *Politics in England* (1965).

Three years later Almond and Sidney Verba produced *The Civic Culture*, which aimed to identify the distinctive behavioural norms and values of a participant, "civic" culture, as opposed to a passive subject culture or a parochial culture. Methodologically, the book was innovative in being based on surveys in America, Britain, Germany, Italy and Mexico, and it documented not only differences between countries but also differences within them, between, for example, the educated and uneducated.

The conclusion emphasised the importance of balancing a modicum of popular participation with a degree of deference that trusted governors to get on with their job, a conclusion that Harold Macmillan could certainly accept. While many findings may now sound commonplace, the emphasis on culture challenged the English tradition of analysing politics in class terms. Fundamental themes from that book later turned up in Robert Putnam's study of social capital and trust, *Making Democracy Work* (1993).

Almond's life provided solid grounding for the study of comparative politics. Although born in Illinois, his grandfather worked against the Tsar and his father trained as a rabbi in England before finding a post in Illinois. Growing up in Chicago in the 1920s was an education in itself. Across the city he saw faces of Europe from the Black Sea and the Vistula to the Shannon. Once a week he studied comparative history, the history of the tribes of Israel over more than 5,000 years.

At the age of 15 he became an Existentialist, but he retained from biblical reading an irreverence for pharisees who put too much trust in methods, and for prophets who claimed that their knowledge was beyond testing with evidence.

Almond matriculated at the University of Chicago in the late 1920s with the ambition of becoming a tough-guy novelist. The Depression redirected his thoughts toward politics; those familiar with his writing style would not regard this as a loss. After spending a year in social work, he returned to do a doctorate in what was then the world's most innovative centre in the study of the social sciences. His teachers were Midwesterners with an American belief in the value of combining learning from books with systematic fieldwork, including quantitative analysis. At that time, such ideas were unheard of at Harvard and Columbia, and at Oxford and the LSE. His fellow graduate students went on to become leaders in political science in America, and one, Herbert Simon, won the Nobel Prize for Economics.

After he completed his doctorate on New York City politics, Almond's first teaching post was at Brooklyn College. He found that his Chicago education made him unconventional in a city where political debate tended, as in Europe, to have as much to do with rhetoric as analysis. During the war he worked in the Office of Wartime Information, using his Chicago training to analyse public opinion and propaganda. At the end of the war he came to Europe as part of a team working on the collapse of political institutions and civilian morale in Germany. He first turned his attention to *The Appeals of Communism* (1954), a topic that he saw in social psychological rather than in simple ideological or materialist terms.

In 1954 he became chairman of the committee on comparative politics of the American Social Science Research Council, a private foundation that encouraged scholars to talk to each other about important ideas rather than to talk to members of Congress about whatever was in the headlines. In the decade that followed, the committee sought to apply ideas pioneered in Chicago to continents adopting new political systems in the wake of the end of empires. Its many volumes have stood the test of time better than the paper constitutions produced by colonial offices in London and Paris.

Almond's broad-ranging ideas initially met fierce criticism, not least from Professor S. E. Finer of Oxford. Up to a point he agreed with critics, for Almond never claimed that his books were anything more than work in progress, a quest to apply big ideas to a world that was changing faster than the minds of people who still relied, as Keynes remarked, on the ideas of long-dead scribblers.

Almond was the least polemical of men — but tenacious in pursuit of what he thought was right. In his later years he borrowed a metaphor from Terence Rattigan in attacking academic schools and sects that dined at separate tables rather than joining together over tea and coffee to exchange ideas, as anthropologists, economists, political scientists and sociologists had done in his day at the University of Chicago.

In the course of half a century, Almond held professorial appointments at Princeton, Yale and, from 1963, at Stanford, where he taught, attended seminars and wrote up to the year of his death. He also held visiting appointments on four continents, including a fellowship at Churchill College, Cambridge, in 1972-73.

As an individual, Almond was the opposite of a stuffy professor. He was what Americans would call a "regular guy", giving no hint in his everyday chat of the depth and breadth of

thought that lay behind the engaging and sometimes quizzical grin. His temperament was well suited to lead a committee of comparative political scientists who were experts on countries as diverse as India and Italy.

His family life reflected 20th-century developments too. His German-born wife, Dorothea, grew up in the last days of the Ottoman Empire; they met in New York after she had to leave Germany with the rise of Hitler. One of his three children became a psychiatrist, an appropriate transition for a person with a professor as a father and a rabbi as a grandfather. His wife predeceased him. He is survived by two sons and a daughter.

Gabriel Almond, political scientist, was born in Rock Island, Illinois, on January 12, 1911. He died in Pacific Grove, California, on December 25, 2002, aged 91.