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Political Symbolism

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The study of political symbolism examines how symbols influence political preferences, identifications, and behavior. It thus intersects with several areas of research in political science, including nationalism, institutional legitimization, political allegiance, social movements, and electoral behavior. The entry first discusses how scholars define *political symbols* and conceptualize their role. It then turns to the factors that make political symbols effective in influencing political attitudes and behavior. It concludes by discussing whether political symbolism is an inescapable feature of political life.

Definition and Role of Political Symbols

A political symbol can be any object, person, word, performance, or gesture that represents a political institution, hierarchy, movement, belief, or ideology. Flags, kings, and queens can thus serve as political symbols, as can songs, poems, and national heroes and heroines, among many potential other examples. Some political symbols are “purpose built” (e.g., flags), while others are objects or practices that exist independently but have become imbued with symbolic significance (e.g., national landscapes). In principle, anything can serve as a political symbol if people associate it with some aspect of political reality.

Political symbols are significant in three main ways. First, symbols simplify and “summarize” the political structures and practices for which they stand. The French flag, for example, represents and encapsulates the many different institutions, practices, and understandings that together constitute the social and political entity called *France*. From this perspective, symbols are signposts that help people cut through the complexity of their political environment, making its different aspects easier to apprehend, recognize, and categorize.

Second, in addition to their cognitive importance, political symbols can connect institutions and beliefs with emotions. Such emotions may include pride, a sense of moral commitment, and a willingness for self-sacrifice. Accordingly, experimental studies show that when people are brought into contact with their national symbols they tend to display higher levels of national consciousness and pride. This affective quality of symbols is important because emotions in turn influence political preferences and behavior. By strengthening affective attachments to leaders, institutions, and ideologies, symbols can increase their perceived legitimacy and promote political obedience. Even many authoritarian regimes with almost unlimited coercive power over their populations have therefore been ardent promoters of political symbols, from Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia to present-day North Korea.

Finally, political symbols can help make a polity or political movement more cohesive. Underpinning this is the observation that a symbol’s meaning is typically multilayered, multidimensional, and ambiguous; the same symbol can trigger different associations and induce different cognitions and emotions in different people. This ambiguity allows actors to rally around a given symbol even if they differ on what that symbol stands for. For instance, in many states terms such as *freedom* and *justice* are laden with symbolic significance and help to legitimize the legal and institutional order. It is precisely *because* these terms are ambiguous that they can serve as effective symbolic rallying points, enabling different actors to unite around them despite enduring differences regarding their meaning.

What Makes Political Symbols Effective?

A central question in the political symbolism literature is how and when political symbols become affectively charged and able to shape political preferences and behavior. One determining factor appears to be the extent to which a symbol’s enactment unites citizens in communal experiences. From pledges of allegiance in schools to singing the national anthem before football games and public minutes of silence to commemorate the war dead, such symbolically infused rituals can intertwine individuals with their political community and the community with its leaders, norms, and institutions. Some of these symbolic enactments are woven into people’s everyday routines. Others consist of set-piece dramatizations that can absorb the participants

into collective exuberance and intense devotion. The gigantic Nuremberg rallies in Nazi Germany with their meticulously scripted speeches, chanting, music, and visual effects are a frequently cited, extreme example of such dramatizations.

Some political symbols, moreover, derive their strength from being rooted in wider identities and traditions. These may include universal human experiences such as birth and kinship, captured by frequent allusions to citizens as “brothers and sisters” and to nations and political movements as “families.” Other political symbols emanate from preexisting religious practices, ethnic identities, and historical memories, and often benefit from the social legitimacy and recognition these enjoy. By extension, such symbols assume a bridging function that can make them especially important during periods of rapid political change. For example, against the backdrop of profound economic transformations, the Chinese Communist Party has increasingly incorporated themes borrowed from Confucianism into the party’s symbolic repertoire. Its ostensible aim is to promote a sense of continuity and to legitimize its policies by symbolically connecting them to China’s ancient past.

Is Political Symbolism Inevitable?

Political symbols offer a representation of political reality that is “abbreviated” and to some extent emotionally slanted. For some theorists, this makes political symbolism inherently problematic as it prevents people from apprehending their political world “as it really is” and may lead them to support rulers and policies that go against their self-interest. An example is the use of nationalist or “patriotic” imagery to generate support for dictatorships or military aggression.

Yet political anthropologists suggest that all types of political systems have symbols, and such symbols cater to human needs that themselves are universal. As concerns the first role of symbols discussed above, social and political reality is too complex and multilayered ever to be apprehended in its raw form without the cognitive shortcuts, signposts, and summaries that symbols provide. The second—emotional—aspect of political symbolism, too, is probably inescapable as it reflects the affective dimension that to some extent inheres in all forms of social and political behavior. Nevertheless, to assert that all politics is in part symbolic says nothing about the *kinds* of beliefs and behavior that different symbols help sustain in different contexts. Nazi symbolism produced powerful emotional pulls and a willingness for self-sacrifice but so, too, have many struggles for democracy. The challenge for political scientists is to explain how in different political circumstances political symbols acquire specific meanings and help sustain particular political allegiances and forms of behavior.

See also [Legitimacy, Forms of](#); [Mass Political Behavior](#); [Obedience](#); [Political Ideology](#); [Political Socialization](#); [Ritual in Politics](#)

- symbolism
- symboling
- political behavior
- willingness to sacrifice
- allegiance
- flag
- Nazi Germany

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Further Readings

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