

CHAPTER 4

American Political Culture

OBJECTIVES

Previous chapters focused on the legal and historical aspects of the United States government. This chapter concentrates instead on the somewhat less concrete notion of “political culture,” or the particular set of beliefs, attitudes, and opinions people (in this case, Americans) have about how their government ought to operate. After reading and reviewing the material in this chapter, the student should be able to do each of the following:

1. Define what scholars mean by political culture, and list some of the dominant aspects of political culture in the United States.
2. Discuss how American citizens compare with those of other countries in their political and economic attitudes.
3. List the contributions to U.S. political culture made by the Revolution, by the nation’s religious heritages, and by the family.
4. Explain how the “culture war” between orthodox and progressive Americans shapes the debate over controversial policy issues.
5. Identify reasons for Americans’ mistrust of government, and explain how it is affected by both political events and political efficacy.
6. Explain why political tolerance is a necessary component of a democratic system.

OVERVIEW

The United States system of government is supported by a political culture that fosters a sense of civic duty, takes pride in the nation’s constitutional arrangements, and provides support for the exercise of essential civil liberties (albeit sometimes out of indifference more than principle). In recent decades, people’s mistrust of government officials (though not of the system itself) has increased, and confidence in officials’ responsiveness to the popular will has declined.

Although Americans value liberty in both the political system and the economy, they believe equality is important principally in the political realm. In economic affairs, although a few people wish to see equality of results, many support equality of opportunity and inequality of results.

Not only is the American culture generally supportive of democratic rule, it also has certain distinctive features that make the American way of governing different from other democracies. Americans are preoccupied with their rights. This fact, combined with a political system that encourages the vigorous exercise of rights and claims, gives political life in the United States an adversarial character. Unlike the Japanese or the Swedes, Americans do not generally reach political decisions by consensus, and they often do not defer to the authority of administrative agencies. U.S. politics, more than that of many other nations, has protracted conflict at every stage.

CHAPTER OUTLINE WITH KEYED-IN RESOURCES

- I. Political culture (THEME A: WHAT IS “AMERICAN POLITICAL CULTURE”?)
 - A. Constitutional differences among the United States, Great Britain, and France
 1. Written constitution (United States, France); unwritten constitution (Great Britain)
 2. Separation of powers (United States); unified powers (Great Britain, France)
 3. Presidential system (United States); semipresidential system (France); parliamentary system (Great Britain)
 - B. Demographic differences among the United States, Great Britain, and France
 1. United States is larger and more diverse
 - a) Over 300 million citizens
 - b) English is dominant language, but millions speak Spanish
 - c) Over 25 percent are non-Hispanic whites
 - d) Over 80 percent identify as Christians, split between Catholics and Protestants
 2. Great Britain and France have similar demographic characteristics
 - a) About 60 million each
 - b) Growing foreign-born populations
 - c) Homogenous religious population
 - C. Differences among the political cultures of the United States, Great Britain, and France
 1. Democracy favored in each country
 2. Americans more likely to favor political equality than economic equality
 3. Americans embrace political equality at earlier age.
 - D. Reasons for America’s democratic success
 1. Abundant territory with greater opportunities for land acquisition
 2. No feudal aristocracy, minimal taxes, and ability to expand westward
 3. Land cultivated through small, independent farms
 4. “Moral and intellectual characteristics” or “political culture” favors democratic rule
 - E. Elements of the American view of the political system
 1. Liberty (rights)
 2. Equality (equal vote; equal chance to participate and succeed)
 3. Democracy (government is accountable to the people)
 4. Civic duty (take community affairs seriously and become involved when possible)
 5. Individual responsibility (individuals responsible for their own actions and well-being)
 - F. Some questions about U.S. political culture
 1. How do we know people share these beliefs?
 - a) Before polls, beliefs were inferred from books, speeches, political choices, and so on.
 - b) Personality tests and comparative polling confirm these shared beliefs that are not held in all nations.
 2. How do we explain behavior inconsistent with these beliefs?
 - a) People take actions contrary to their beliefs in everyday life; self-interest and social circumstance also shape behavior.
 - b) Beliefs are still important and may cause changes in behavior.
 3. Why is there so much political conflict in U.S. history?
 - a) Broad values may not be applicable to specific controversies.
 - b) Beliefs contradict one another and are not consistently interpreted.
 4. Most consistent evidence of a common political culture is the use of the terms *Americanism* or *American way of life* and *un-American*
 - G. The Persistence of Conflict

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1. Despite ending slavery, endorsing civil rights, and expanding free discussion, Americans still have areas of political conflict.
 - a) Among the persistent areas of disagreement are abortion, morality, religion, immigration, and affirmative action.
 - b) Some believe in absolute moral principles, whereas others believe in a relativistic value system where moral choices should reflect situational conditions.
2. Conflicts arise over the definition of good citizenship. Two contrasting definitions of citizenship are offered.
 - a) Some argue that persons who pay their taxes, obey the law, and support the military are good citizens.
 - b) In contrast, good citizens are skeptical of government, join protest movements, and boycott products they don't like.
3. These views tend to reflect age differences. Older Americans who grew up during the Great Depression or World War II are more likely to favor the first view of good citizenship. Younger persons born between 1964 and 1984 and with college educations tend to favor the latter definition.
4. Distrust between these two generations persists.
 - a) Members of the older generation feel that members of the younger group are alienated, distrustful, self-centered, and lacking in clear moral guidance.
 - b) Members of the next generation, the children of baby boomers, argue that older people are rigid, conformists, overly supportive of the status quo and too pro-military.
5. Overall, Americans still love their country. When polled, 91 percent of whites, 80 percent of blacks, and 91 percent of Hispanics said they either love this country "very much" or "extremely" so.

H. The Economic System

1. Americans support free enterprise, but see limits on marketplace freedom.
2. Americans believe in equality of opportunity in the economy but not equality of result.
3. Americans have a widely shared commitment to economic individualism.

II. Comparing America with other nations

A. Americans like their own country

1. Seventy-one percent of Americans are proud to be American, compared with only 21 percent of Germans who are proud to be German.
2. A majority of Europeans believe that forces beyond an individual's control determine that individual's success in life. Americans emphasize the importance of individual initiative in the achievement of personal success.
3. Americans have a much deeper belief in the importance of God for morality, compared with their European counterparts.
4. Americans have very different views about important things compared with Europeans.

B. Political system

1. Sweden has a well-developed democracy, but its political culture is more deferential than participatory
 - a) Almost all adults vote in national elections, but few participate in any other way.
 - b) Defer to government experts and specialists
 - c) Rarely challenge governmental decisions in court
 - d) Believe in “what is best” more than “what people want”
 - e) Value equality as much as (or more than) liberty
 - f) Value harmony and observe obligations
2. Japan has a wholly different history and set of traditions.
 - a) Value good relations with colleagues, group decisions, and social harmony
 - b) Emphasize importance of being sensitive to personal needs of others, avoiding conflict, reaching decisions through discussion rather than application of rules
 - c) Tremendous importance given to respecting hierarchy
3. Americans
 - a) Tend to assert rights
 - b) Emphasize individualism, competition, equality, following rules, treating others fairly but impersonally
4. Cultural differences affect political and economic systems
5. . Classic study reported that in 1959–60, U.S. and British citizens had a stronger sense of civic duty and competence than the citizens of Germany, Italy, or Mexico
 - a) Civic duty: a belief that one has an obligation to participate in civic and political affairs
 - b) Civic competence: a belief that one can affect government policies
6. Subsequent research comparing Americans and Europeans
 - a) Americans lag in voting rates but not in other forms of participation
 - b) Americans have more confidence in government institutions
 - c) Americans acknowledge flaws but still report being “very patriotic”

B. Economic system

1. Swedes tend to favor equal pay and top limit on incomes
2. Americans favor economic freedom over equality
3. Americans are less likely to think that hard work goes unrewarded
4. Americans are less likely to think that government should guarantee citizens a basic standard of living

C. Impact of religion on political culture

1. Effect of religion on civic life
 - a) Americans more likely than Europeans to believe in God, pray daily, and acknowledge a clear standard of right and wrong
 - b) Religious people donate more money and time to charitable organizations than nonreligious people do.
2. Effect of religion on politics
 - a) Religious beliefs important in American founding
 - a) Both liberals and conservatives use pulpit to promote political change.
 - b) Candidates for national office in most other contemporary democracies rarely mention religion; U.S. candidates frequently invoke religious themes.

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- III. The sources of political culture (THEME B: DIVISIONS IN AMERICAN POLITICAL CULTURE)
- A. Historical roots
1. American Revolution was essentially over liberty—asserting rights
 2. Animating spirit of the Constitution was the effort to reconcile personal liberty with social control
 3. Adversarial spirit of political culture reflects long-standing distrust of authority that stems from the belief that human nature is fundamentally depraved (original sin)
 4. Jeffersonian transition in 1800 reconciled need for and suspicion of government
 - a) Legitimated the role of the opposition party
 - b) Demonstrated that liberty and political change can coexist
- B. Legal-sociological factors
1. Widespread (not universal) participation permitted by Constitution
 2. Absence of an established national religion made religious diversity inevitable
 - a) Religious diversity a source of cleavage
 - b) Absence of established religion facilitated the absence of political orthodoxy
 - c) Protestant heritage emphasizes personal achievement:
 - (1) Work hard
 - (2) Save money
 - (3) Obey secular law
 - (4) Do good worksMax Weber described this as the “Protestant ethic” (work ethic)
 - d) Miniature political systems were produced by churches’ congregational organizations, so civic and political skills could develop
 3. Family instills the ways Americans think about the world and politics.
 - a) Greater freedom of children and equality among family members leads to . . .
 - b) . . . Belief in rights and acceptance of diverse views in decision making
 4. High degree of class consciousness absent
 - a) Class consciousness: thinking of oneself as a worker whose interests are in opposition to those of management, or vice versa
 - b) Most people consider themselves middle class
 - c) Message of Horatio Alger stories is still popular: that success is available to people who work hard
- C. The culture war
1. Cultural clashes in America battle over values
 2. Two cultural “camps” defined by James Davison Hunter
 - a) Orthodox camp:
 - (1) Usually consists of fundamentalist Protestants and evangelical Christians
 - (2) Believes that moral values are derived from the commands of God or the laws of nature
 - (3) Perceives morality as clear, unchanging, and independent of personal preferences
 - b) Progressive camp:
 - (1) Usually consists of liberal Protestants and people with no strong religious beliefs
 - (2) Believes that personal freedom is as important as, or more important than, traditional moral rules
 - (3) Perceives moral rules as complex, changeable, and dependent on individual preferences

3. Culture war differs from political disputes in three ways:
 - a) Money is not at stake.
 - b) Compromises are almost impossible.
 - c) Conflict is more profound.
 4. Two views on importance of culture war to politics
 - a) Morris Fiorina: Culture war is a “myth”; political leaders are polarized, but most Americans occupy a middle position on policy issues.
 - b) Alan Abramowitz: People more likely to choose party affiliations based on policy positions; growing percentage of Americans is politically engaged.
- IV. Mistrust of government
- A. Overall steady decline in number of Americans who trust government since late 1950s; increases seen only during Reagan presidency and period following 2001 terrorist attacks
 - B. Causes
 1. Vietnam (1960s)
 2. Watergate (1970s)
 3. Clinton impeachment (1990s)
 4. War in Iraq (2000s)
 - C. Necessary to view this crisis in context
 1. Level of trust in 1950s may have been abnormally high
 2. May have been fewer catalysts to express patriotism in 1960s and 1970s
 3. Events of 9/11 provided reason for extraordinary outburst of patriotic fervor
 - D. Americans have a reduced level of confidence in government. Only 12 percent of Americans have a lot of confidence in Congress.
 1. Americans have a declining sense of confidence in churches, public schools, newspapers, unions and big business.
 2. The military is the only institution in which public confidence has increased.
 3. Declining trust in political institutions and leaders may increase support for nonincumbent candidates
- V. Civil Society
- A. Civil Society is that collection of private, voluntary groups that, being independent of the government and the commercial market, make human cooperation easier and provide ways of holding the government accountable for its actions.
 1. Americans are more likely to join voluntary groups than are people in other democracies.
 - a) These organizations teach people how to cooperate, develop community serving skills, and increase social capital.
 - b.) *Social capital* refers to connections people have with each other through friendship, personal contact, and group effort.
 - B. Importance of Social Capital
 1. Robert Putnam argues that the greater the amount of trust among group/community members, the easier it is to achieve common goals such as improving a neighborhood or combating intolerance, which in turn produces useful projects.
 2. Some worry that social capital may be decreasing as people are less likely to join voluntary associations. Americans once bowled in leagues; now they bowl alone. Americans no longer participate in the PTA, the NAACP, or the VFW. Now they stay at home and watch television.

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3. There are three qualifications to this argument.
 - a.) Americans join more groups than do people in other democracies.
 - b.) A general measure of civil health, combining group membership with informal human contact, has increased.
 - c.) In ethnically and racially diverse communities, Americans “hunker down.” They don’t trust their neighbors, contribute to charities, cooperate with others, or join voluntary groups.

VI. . Political tolerance

- A. Minimal level of tolerance crucial to democratic politics
 1. Allows free discussion of ideas
 2. Allows selection of rulers without oppression
- B. Levels of American political tolerance
 1. Most Americans agree in the abstract with freedom of speech, majority rule, and right to circulate petitions.
 2. Most Americans would deny these rights in concrete cases.
 3. Americans are generally becoming more tolerant.
 4. Most Americans believe that the nation is too tolerant of harmful behaviors; defense of common moral standards is more important than protection of individual rights.
 5. Still, most are willing to allow expression by those with whom they disagree.
- C. How do very unpopular groups survive?
 1. Most people do not act on their beliefs
 2. Officeholders and activists are more tolerant than general public.
 3. Usually no consensus exists on whom to persecute.
 4. Courts are sufficiently insulated from public opinion to enforce constitutional protections.

IMPORTANT TERMS

civic competence	A belief that one can affect government policies
civic duty	A belief that one has an obligation to participate in civic and political affairs.
civil society	Voluntary action that makes cooperation easier
class consciousness	A belief that one is a member of an economic group whose interests are opposed to those of people in other such groups
orthodox	In political terms, someone who believes that that morality and religion ought to be of decisive importance
political culture	A patterned and sustained way of thinking about how politics and government ought to be carried out
progressive	A belief that personal freedom and solving social problems are more important than religion

THEME A: WHAT IS “AMERICAN POLITICAL CULTURE”?

Instructor Resources

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Todd Estes. *The Jay Treaty Debate, Public Opinion, and the Evolution of Early American Political Culture*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006.

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Judith Rodin and Stephen P. Steinberg, eds. *Public Discourse in America: Conversation and Community in the Twenty-First Century*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003.

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Summary

Political culture is a “distinctive and patterned way of thinking about how political life ought to be carried out.” The key elements of American political culture in the United States are the following:

- Liberty: freedom from government restraints and protection of rights
- Individual responsibility: barring disability, individuals are responsible for their own actions and well-being
- Equality: an equal vote and an equal chance to succeed
- Democracy: government officials are accountable to the people
- Civic duty: the obligation to take part in community affairs

It is interesting to note how these elements of the United States political culture almost mirror the principles articulated by John Locke, making the United States a liberal nation in a philosophical sense. Although we cannot prove that these elements exist, we can infer them from the books that Americans read, the speeches they hear, the slogans to which they respond, the political choices they make, and the observations of insightful foreign visitors. Inconsistent behavior and political conflict in United States history can also be logically correlated with the political culture.

It may be difficult to see American political culture unless one is aware of the political culture of other nations. It is widely known that the Japanese prefer collaboration and formality of manners to America's preference for individual accomplishment and informality. Most European nations do not feel that working beyond a certain number of hours per week (for example, forty) is acceptable, whereas the typical week for the American worker is now closer to fifty hours (plus substantial commuting time). Even a nation as geographically and culturally close as Canada manifests a political culture that is quite different from that found in the United States; Canadian law strongly discourages gun ownership, whereas the tradition of bearing arms in America predates the Constitution.

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Indeed, American political culture is strong enough to create certain policy problems (for example, homelessness) and then to keep some solutions to these policy issues off the agenda (or at least on the back burner) for decades, even centuries. One does not see as many homeless people in other northern nations such as Canada or France. Why does homelessness exist in the United States? And what can be done about it? The most obvious solution to the problem of homelessness is to guarantee each person the right to appropriate shelter. But American political culture does not allow this problem or this solution to be the topic of serious public debate. The idea of individual responsibility—a primary component of American political culture—means that each individual must gain his or her own shelter. Homelessness is not a *necessary* part of the American public landscape, but solving this problem is made more difficult by U.S. political culture.

Discussion Questions

1. Since Tocqueville's day, the United States has experienced waves of immigration from cultures contrasting with the ethnic identities present at the country's founding. How have these groups changed the political culture of the nation?
2. In the past, government regulation targeted individual behaviors that produced unhealthy side effects for society. Today, legislation prohibits behaviors that are merely unhealthy for the individual. For example, New York City recently banned food products containing trans fats because they are unhealthy for the consumer; California now requires children to have dental exams prior to enrolling in public school; and many states require motorcycle and bicycle riders to wear protective helmets. If individual liberty is a part of American political culture, how do these "nanny state" policies garner enough support to become law? Do you think there is a limit on how much regulation Americans will tolerate?
3. Does the growing American welfare state—wherein the government provides unemployment income, retirement income, educational subsidies, housing vouchers, and medical care for the poor—suggest that individual responsibility is no longer a key component of American political culture? Why or why not?

THEME B: DIVISIONS IN AMERICAN POLITICAL CULTURE

Instructor Resources

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Morris P. Fiorina. *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America*. 2nd ed. New York: Pearson Education, 2006.

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Kenneth D. Wald and Allison Calhoun-Brown. *Religion and Politics in the United States*. 5th ed. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007.

Summary

American political culture is characterized by the following elements:

1. The American Revolution, which had liberty as its object; the founding experience created a preoccupation with the assertion and maintenance of rights
2. The absence of an official religion, which encouraged religious pluralism and, ultimately, political pluralism
3. The dominance of Protestantism, which promotes individualism and personal responsibility
4. Child-rearing practices that treat children as valuable members of the family
5. Deep divisions over morality-based policy issues; fundamentalist Christians believe in an unchanging standard of right and wrong, but progressive Christians and secular Americans adhere to an individualistic understanding of morality

Despite a number of unifying characteristics, American political culture is by no means cohesive. In the early 1990s, James Davison Hunter suggested that Americans had become fractured over the definition and application of morality. He argued that this division produced two distinct cultural groups: one that is culturally conservative and espouses a traditional definition of morality, and one that is culturally liberal and embraces a moral perspective that is more flexible and individualistic. Although the two groups typically differ with regard to religious beliefs, their conflict is over policy—not theology. In particular, they often clash over specific morality-based issues, such as abortion, gay marriage, embryonic stem cell research, and sex-education programs. Although the battles between the two groups have been ongoing for some time, neither side appears willing to compromise its position. Consequently, conflict over the understanding of morality may become a permanent part of American political culture.

In addition to being susceptible to ongoing conflict, American political culture also has a tendency to change over time. For example, the trust that Americans have in their government has varied considerably, dropping substantially during the days of Vietnam and Watergate. Americans no longer support their political leaders to the degree that they did in the 1950s, and the decline is perhaps attributable to unrealized governmental policies and social turmoil. A similar drop has occurred in the public's sense of external efficacy (system responsiveness); Americans are now much more likely to say that public officials care little about what the people think or want. American political efficacy remains higher than in many other countries. Finally, Americans remain more tolerant of unpopular ideas, individuals, and groups in the abstract than in reality. Yet because Americans often do not act on their beliefs; cannot agree on which group, individual, or idea should be suppressed; and permit the courts to enforce constitutional protections, personal liberties and constitutional freedoms endure.

Discussion Questions

1. States and regions typically have their own distinctive political cultures. If you have moved or traveled from one state (or region) to another, what are some of the cultural contrasts you have experienced? How significant are these cultural differences?

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2. Should not both Vietnam and Watergate have increased the sense of political efficacy in the United States, since the system did respond? What about the sense of efficacy regarding the war on terrorism and the war in Iraq?
3. What policies could public officials adopt to increase political efficacy among citizens? Cite some possible examples.
4. What policy issues are most divisive in America at this time? How do citizens' responses to these issues reflect elements of the culture war over the definition and role of morality?