

## 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 inherited 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 attitudes.
3. List the contributions to United States political culture made by the Revolution, by the nation’s religious heritages, and by the family. Explain the apparent absence of class consciousness in the U.S.
4. Define internal and external political efficacy, and explain how the level of each of these has varied over the past generations.

### 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 their 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, while a few people wish to see equality of results, many support equality of opportunity and inequality of results.

Not only is our culture generally supportive of democratic rule, it also has certain distinctive features that make our 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 we often do not defer to the authority of administrative agencies. United States politics, more than those 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. Alexis de Tocqueville on why democracy could take root in the U.S.
    1. No feudal aristocracy; minimal taxes; few legal restraints
    2. Westward movement; vast territory provided opportunities
    3. Nation of small, independent farmers

4. "Moral and intellectual characteristics"—today called "political culture"
- B. Definition of political culture
- \_\_\_\_\_ and patterned way of thinking about how political and \_\_\_\_\_ life ought to be carried out
  - For example, Americans generally believe more strongly in \_\_\_\_\_ than in \_\_\_\_\_ equality
- C. Elements of the American view of the political system
- \_\_\_\_\_ rights
  - \_\_\_\_\_ (equal vote; equal chance to participate and succeed)
  - Democracy (government is accountable to the people)
  - \_\_\_\_\_ (take community affairs seriously and become involved when possible)
  - Individual \_\_\_\_\_ individuals responsible for their own actions and well-being
- D. Some questions about the U.S. political culture
- How do we know people share these beliefs?
    - Before polls, beliefs were \_\_\_\_\_ from books, speeches, political choices etc.
    - Personality tests and comparative polling confirm these as shared beliefs that are not held in all nations
  - How do we explain behavior inconsistent with these beliefs?
    - People take actions \_\_\_\_\_ to their beliefs in everyday life; \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ also shape behavior \_\_\_\_\_
    - Beliefs are still important and may cause \_\_\_\_\_ in behavior
  - Why is there so much political conflict in U.S. history?
    - Broad values may not be applicable to specific \_\_\_\_\_
    - Beliefs contradict one another and are not consistently interpreted \_\_\_\_\_
  - Most consistent evidence of a common political culture is the use of the terms "Americanism" and \_\_\_\_\_
- E. The Economic System
- Americans support free enterprise, but see limits on marketplace \_\_\_\_\_
  - Americans believe in equality of opportunity in the economy, but not equality of \_\_\_\_\_
  - Americans have a widely shared commitment to economic individualism \_\_\_\_\_
- II. Comparing America with other nations
- A. Political system
- Sweden has a well-developed democracy, but its political culture is more deferential than participatory \_\_\_\_\_
    - Almost all adults \_\_\_\_\_ in national elections, but few participate in any other way
    - Defer to government experts and specialists
    - Rarely \_\_\_\_\_ governmental decisions in court \_\_\_\_\_
    - Believe in "what is best" more than "what people \_\_\_\_\_"
    - Value \_\_\_\_\_ as much as (or more than) liberty \_\_\_\_\_
    - Value harmony and observe obligations
  - Japan has a wholly different history and set of traditions \_\_\_\_\_
    - Value good relations with colleagues, group decisions, and social \_\_\_\_\_
    - Emphasize importance of being sensitive to personal needs of others, avoiding conflict, reaching decisions through \_\_\_\_\_ rather than application of rules
    - Tremendous importance given to respecting hierarchy
  - Americans
    - Tend to assert rights
    - Emphasize \_\_\_\_\_ competition, equality, following rules, treating others fairly but \_\_\_\_\_
  - Cultural differences affect political and economic systems \_\_\_\_\_
  - Danger of overgeneralizing: there are many diverse groups within a \_\_\_\_\_

7. Subsequent research comparing Americans and Europeans
    - a) Americans lag in participation rates but not in other forms of participation
    - b) Americans have more confidence in government + institutions
    - c) Americans acknowledge flaws but are still "very proud" of their national identity and "would be willing to fight" for their country in the event of war
  - B. Economic system
    1. Swedes tend to favor high pay and top limit on income
    2. Americans favor economic freedom over equity
    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. Civic role of religion
    1. Americans are more religious compared to Europeans
    2. Churches, synagogues, mosques and other religious organizations are the country's primary source of social and community service
  - D. Religion and Politics
    1. Religious beliefs have played an important role in American politics
    2. Both liberals and conservatives have and do use the same to promote political change
    3. Candidates for national office in most other contemporary democracies regularly mention religion; drastically different in the U.S.
- III. The sources of political culture (THEME B: DIVISIONS IN AMERICAN POLITICAL CULTURE)
- A. Historical roots
    1. American Revolution was essentially over rights —asserting rights
    2. Animating spirit of the Constitution was the effort to reconcile liberty with control
    3. Concern with assertion and maintenance of rights has resulted in an individualistic culture
    4. Long-standing distrust of authority reflects belief that human nature is depraved (original sin)
    5. Jeffersonian transition in 1800 reconciled need for and suspicion of government
      - a) strengthened 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 strength
      - b) Absence of established religion facilitated the absence of political orthodoxy
      - c) Puritan heritage stress on personal achievement:
        - (1) Work
        - (2) Save money
        - (3) Obey secular law
        - (4) Do good works
        - (5) Max Weber described this as the "Protestant ethic" (work ethic)
      - d) Miniature political systems were produced by churches' congregational organization, so civic and political skills could develop
    3. Individualism instills the ways we think about world and politics
      - a) Greater freedom of children and equality among family members...
      - b) ...leads to belief in rights and acceptance of diverse views in decision-making
    4. High degree of class consciousness absent
      - a) Absence of 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: success is available to people who work hard

- C. The culture war (54)
1. Cultural classes in America battle over \_\_\_\_\_
  2. Culture war differs from political disputes in three ways:
    - a) (55) \_\_\_\_\_ is not at stake (56)
    - b) Compromises are almost \_\_\_\_\_
    - c) Conflict is more profound
  3. Culture conflict animated by deep differences in people's beliefs about private and public (57) \_\_\_\_\_ standards that ought to govern individual behavior and social arrangements
  4. Simplify by identifying two cultural "camps"
    - a) (58) \_\_\_\_\_: morality is as, or more, important than self-expression; morality derives from fixed rules from God
    - b) (59) \_\_\_\_\_: personal freedom is as, or more, important than tradition; rules change based on circumstances of modern life and individual preferences
  5. Orthodox associated with fundamentalist (60)
  6. Progressives associated with liberal Protestants and those with no strong (61) \_\_\_\_\_ beliefs
  7. Culture war occurring both between and within religious denominations
  8. Current culture war has special historical importance due to two changes:
    - a) More people consider themselves progressives than previously
    - b) Rise of (62) \_\_\_\_\_, makes it easier to mobilize people
- IV. Mistrust of government
- A. Evidence of increase since late 1950s
1. By 1980, only about 25% of people trusted Washington most of the time or just about always
  2. By 1992, 2/3 of people said public officials did not care what the public thought
  3. Mistrust directed at officials, not government system
- B. Causes
1. (63) \_\_\_\_\_
  2. Vietnam
  3. (64) \_\_\_\_\_
- 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 (65)
  3. Events of September 11, 2001 provided reason for extraordinary outburst of \_\_\_\_\_ fervor
- D. In summary: (66)
1. Public confidence likely to ebb and flow with \_\_\_\_\_; support for President and military most likely to fluctuate (67)
  2. No dramatic change in confidence in \_\_\_\_\_ themselves or in the system as a whole
- V. Political efficacy (68)
- A. Definition: citizen's capacity to understand and \_\_\_\_\_ political events
- B. Political efficacy has two parts
1. Internal efficacy
    - a) Confidence in one's ability to understand and influence events
    - b) Currently, about the same as in 1950s
  2. (69) \_\_\_\_\_ efficacy
    - a) Belief that system will respond to citizens
    - b) Not shaped by particular events
    - c) Declined steadily since the 1960s
    - d) Americans seem to believe that government is becoming too (70) \_\_\_\_\_ to respond to individual preferences (71)
- C. Comparison: efficacy is still much higher among Americans than among \_\_\_\_\_

- D. Conclusion
  - 1. Americans today may not be more alienated...
  - 2. ...but simply more
- VI. Political tolerance
  - A. Minimal level of tolerance crucial to democratic politics
    - 1. Allows discussion of ideas
    - 2. Allows selection of rulers without oppression
  - B. Levels of American political
    - 1. Most Americans assent in abstract
    - 2. Most Americans would deny these rights in cases
    - 3. Americans are generally becoming more tolerant
    - 4. Many people still fear that the nation is too tolerant of harmful which leads many people to defend common standards over protecting 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
    - 2. Officeholders and activists more tolerant than general public
    - 3. Usually no consensus exists on whom to persecute
    - 4. Courts are sufficiently 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.
- \*class consciousness Belief that you are a member of an economics group whose interests are opposed to people in other such groups.
- \*orthodox religion A belief that morality and religion ought to be of decisive importance.
- \*political culture A coherent way of thinking about how politics and government ought to be carried out.
- \*political efficacy A belief that you can participate in politics (internal efficacy) or that the government will respond to the citizenry (external efficacy).
- \*progressive religion A belief that personal freedom and solving social problems is more important than religion.

**THEME A: WHAT IS “AMERICAN POLITICAL CULTURE”?**

**Instructor Resources**

Stephen E. Ambrose and Douglas G. Brinkley, *Rise to Globalism*, 8th revised ed. New York: Penguin Books, 1997.

Bernard Bailyn, *The Origins of American Politics*. New York: Random House, 1970.

Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart, Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, updated edition. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996.

Joel S. Fetzer, *Public Attitudes Toward Immigration in the United States, France, and Germany*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1955.

Steven Kelman, *American Democracy and the Public Good*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999.

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Steven Kelman, *American Democracy and the Public Good*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999.

Will Kymlicka, *Politics in the Vernacular: Nationalism, Multiculturalism, and Citizenship*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Seymour M. Lipset, *American Exceptionalism—A Double-Edged Sword*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1996.

Gary Wolfe Marks and Seymour Martin Lipset, *It Didn't Happen Here: Why Socialism Failed in the United States*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2000.

Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *The Breaking of the American Social Compact*. New York: New Press, 1997.

Esmeralda Santiago, *When I Was Puerto Rican*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994.

Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1969.

### 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 one cannot prove that these elements exist, they can be inferred 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 (e.g., 40) is acceptable whereas the typical week for the American worker is now closer to 50 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 U.S.; Canadian law strongly discourages gun ownership, while the tradition of bearing arms in America pre-dates the Constitution.

Indeed, American political culture is strong enough to create certain policy problems (e.g., 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 homeless people in other northern nations such as Canada or France. Why does homelessness exist in the U.S.? 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 our political culture—means that each individual must attain their 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 de Tocqueville, 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. What kinds of political, social, legal and economic problems are unique to (or more prominent in) the U.S. than they are in other places? What role does American political culture play in creating and/or exacerbating these problems? What potential solutions to these problems are also not viable because of the constraints of political culture?
3. As communications systems and the economy become increasingly global, what changes might be predicted in the political culture of the United States? Or, as some predict, will the political culture of the United States impose itself on other nations? Consider the influence of American pop culture—movies and entertainment, fast food, and so forth—in answering this question.

## THEME B: DIVISIONS IN AMERICAN POLITICAL CULTURE

### Instructor Resources

Mary Catherine Bateson, *Full Circles, Overlapping Lives: Culture and Generation in Transition*. New York: Random House, 2000.

Cathy Cohen, Kathleen B. Jones, and Joan C. Tronto, eds., *Women Transforming Politics, An Alternative Reader*. New York: New York University Press, 1997.

Daniel Elazar, *American Federalism: A View from the States*. New York: Harper Collins, 1984.

William Finnegan, *Cold New World, Growing Up in a Harder Country*. New York: Random House, 1998.

Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice, Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982.

Tracy Kidder, *Home Town*. New York: Pocket Books, 1999.

Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone, The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000.

Michael J. Sandel, "America's Search for a New Public Philosophy," *The Atlantic Monthly* 277.3 (March 1996): 57-74.

Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and "The Politics of Recognition."* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992.

Paul J. Weithman, *Religion and Contemporary Liberalism.* Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 1997.

## Summary

The sources of the American political culture include the following four elements:

1. The American Revolution had liberty as its object, and the founding experience created a preoccupation with the assertion and maintenance of rights.
2. The absence of an official religion encouraged religious pluralism and, ultimately, political pluralism.
3. The dominance of Protestantism promoted a participant-oriented culture.
4. Child-rearing practices stressing equality among family members and freedom for children produced corresponding political values.

However, the values of the political culture are not immune to change. 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. Still, 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.

But American political culture is by no means monolithic: Daniel Elazar has identified the existence of a unique political culture within each state, derived in part from the values of the dominant religious denomination. Elazar's three primary American political cultures are the *individualistic* culture, the *moralistic* culture, and the *traditionalistic* culture. These three subcultures take the major aspects of American political culture and prioritize them a bit differently. Thus, elements of United States political culture take on a slightly different character across the nation, and the workings of federalism ensure that many public policies will reflect that difference.

## Discussion Questions

1. States and regions typically have their own distinctive political cultures. What are some of the cultural contrasts you have experienced if you have moved or traveled from one state (or region) to another? How significant are these cultural differences?
2. Shouldn't both Vietnam and Watergate have increased the sense of political efficacy in the United States, since the system did respond? What about the Iran-contra and Whitewater investigations?
3. What policies could public officials adopt to increase political efficacy among citizens? Cite some possible examples.
4. What issues are most divisive in America at this time? How do citizens' responses to these issues reflect regional differences in American political culture? What other cultural differences might these divisions reflect?