

POLITICAL CULTURE

Every country has a **political culture** - a set of widely shared beliefs, values, and norms concerning the ways that political and economic life ought to be carried out. The political culture defines the relationship of citizens to government, to one another, and to the economy. A good understanding of a country's political culture can help you make sense of the way a country's government is set up, as well as the political decisions its leaders make.

The American political culture may share beliefs, values, and norms, with those of others countries, but the sum and configuration of each political culture is unique. A **conflictual political culture** is one in which different groups (or subcultures) clash with opposing beliefs and values; a **consensual political culture** experiences less conflict. No matter how broadly the consensus is held, any culture contains values that overlap and conflict; the American political culture is no exception. Although many conflicts exist within the political system in the United States, American political culture is generally consensual because we have a broad based of shared political values. Most of our conflicts occur because we disagree on how these values should be implemented, not on the basic beliefs themselves.

ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE

Alexis de Tocqueville - an early observer of American political culture - came to the United States during the 1830s to investigate why the American democracy seemed to be so successful, especially since his native France seemed to be having so much trouble with it. Tocqueville recorded his observations in *Democracy in America*, a book that remains today a classic study of American political values. He identified several factors that he believed to be critical in shaping America's successful democracy:

- Abundant and fertile land
- Countless opportunities for people to acquire land and make a living
- Lack of a feudal aristocracy that blocked others' ambitions
- An independent spirit encouraged by frontier living

Although many years have passed since Tocqueville made his famous observations about American political culture, these factors shaped our basic values of liberty, individualism, equal opportunity, democracy, rule of law, and civic duty.

SHARED VALUES

The values of the American political culture are grounded in the eighteenth century Enlightenment philosophy that so heavily influenced the founders. Over the years other values have been added, some supporting the original ones, some conflicting. American political beliefs and behaviors today reflect an accumulation of these values throughout United States history.

CORE VALUES

The following values have shaped the political culture since the founding of the country:

- **Liberty** - The value of liberty probably was the most important inspiration to the American Revolution, and it remains a core value today. Liberty was one of the natural rights first cited by John Locke and later by Thomas Jefferson: ..."that among these [rights] are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness..."
- **Equality** - Again, Thomas Jefferson refers to this basic value in the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal..." Although most Americans don't believe that everyone is equal in every sense of the word, the basic beliefs in equality of opportunity and equal treatment before the law have influenced the political system greatly.
- **Individualism** - The values of equality and liberty are complemented by a commitment to the importance and dignity of the individual. Under our system of government, individuals have both rights and responsibilities. "**Rugged individualism**" is a reflection of this value: the belief that individuals are responsible for their own well-being and that the strength of our system lies in the ability of individuals to be left alone to compete for success. This value is associated with the a belief in the "common sense" of ordinary people and their ability to not only take care of themselves, but choose their government leaders as well.
- **Democracy** - Most Americans believe that government should be based on the consent of the governed, or that legitimacy ultimately lies in the hands of the people. We also believe in majority rule, but our emphasis on liberty and individualism causes us to believe that the rights of the minority should be protected as well.
- **Rule of law** - The belief that government is based on a body of law applied equally, impartially, and justly is central to American political culture. Rule of law stands in opposition to **rule by an individual**, which too many Americans implies following the whims of a dictator.
- **Civic duty** - Tocqueville noted that Americans of the early 19th century had a well-developed sense of community and individual responsibility to support community efforts. Although critics today observe that sense of community is not as strong in modern day, most Americans believe that they *ought to* be involved in local affairs and help out when they can.

Some international studies show that Americans by comparison tend to be more nationalistic, optimistic, and idealistic than people in other countries, although the scope of these studies is limited.

CHANGING AMERICAN VALUES

The firmly entrenched values of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were altered radically by the Industrial Revolution of the late 1800s. The most profound economic change was the increase in the inequality in the distribution of wealth and income. By the end of the century great wealth lay in the hands of a few people - the entrepreneurs or "robber barons." In a sense, the economic development brought out some inherent conflicts between the "core" values already established.

- **Capitalism** - Before the late 1800s, most personal wealth was based on land ownership. The commitment to **capitalism** - wealth based on money and other capital goods - became an additional shared political value during the Industrial Revolution, one that complements individualism and freedom.
- **Free enterprise** - During this same time period, American beliefs in freedom and individuals came to embrace **free enterprise** - economic competition without restraint from government.

These values reinforced the older emphasis on individualism. Just as early Americans had sought their fortune by claiming and farming new land by their own individual efforts, entrepreneurs of the late 19th century were flexing their muscles in the new industrial economy. However, the new commitment conflicted with the old value of equality, and tensions resulted. For example, robber barons were accused of exploiting workers and limiting competition in order to get ahead themselves, not only challenging equality, but other people's liberty as well. Monopolies also caused many to question equality of opportunity. The era illustrated inherent conflicts among the core values that had been in place for more than a century. The resolution was to legislate new government regulations to ensure fair treatment in the marketplace, and another belief was added to our political culture: government responsibility for the general welfare.

VALUE CHANGES DURING THE 1930s

Although the Preamble to the Constitution states that **promotion of the General Welfare** is a major purpose of government, the meaning of that value was transformed during the 1930s. The Great Depression brought about the near-collapse of capitalism, and the New Deal was an affirmation of the government's responsibility for the welfare of its people. In Roosevelt's 1944 inaugural address, he outlined a "**Second Bill of Rights**" that reflected his firm commitment to "economic security and independence." For example, he asserted everyone's rights to a useful job, food, clothing, a decent home, adequate medical care, and the right to a good education. These beliefs played a major role in the creation of the

civil rights and welfare legislation of the 1960s, and as recently as the early 1990s, Clinton referred to Roosevelt's Second Bill of Rights when he said, "Health care is a basic right all should have." The defeat of his health care plan indicates that Americans don't always agree on the meaning of this value. Again, the movement created tension over the value of individualism, or the individual's responsibility to take care of himself. The government's responsibility for the general welfare became a major issue of the 2000 election campaign as candidates George W. Bush and Al Gore debated the merits of a government-sponsored prescription plan for the elderly, and again in 2004, as President Bush supported privatization of Social Security programs, and challenger John Kerry did not.

POLITICAL TOLERANCE

Another American value that is easily misunderstood is **political tolerance**. Democracy depends on citizens being reasonably tolerant of the opinions and actions of others, and most Americans believe themselves to be fairly tolerant. Studies show that political tolerance is much more complex a value than it appears on the surface. Among their findings are:

- The overwhelming majority of Americans agree with freedom of speech, religion, right to petition - at least in the abstract.
- *People are not as politically tolerant as they proclaim themselves to be.*
- Americans are willing to allow many people with whom they disagree to do a great deal politically.
- Americans have become more tolerant over the last few decades.
- Most people dislike one or another group strongly enough to deny it certain political rights, although people are not always inclined to act on their beliefs. As a general rule, people are willing to deny rights to people on the opposite end of the political spectrum. For example, liberals are most likely to deny right-wing groups, such as neo-Nazis or self-styled militia groups their rights, and conservatives are most likely to deny them to groups they may disapprove of, such as gays, atheists, or black militants. In conflict with popular opinion, research does not show that liberals are necessarily more tolerant than conservatives.

MISTRUST OF THE GOVERNMENT

A recent trend in changing American political values and beliefs is that of growing **mistrust of the government**. Although the trust reflected in the 1950s and early 1960s may have been artificially high, trust in government and its officials has declined significantly since the mid-1960s. Many scholars blamed the Vietnam War and Watergate for the initial, dramatic drops, but the trend is persistent into the early 21st century, with Americans in record numbers expressing disgust with politics and politicians.

Accompanying the mistrust of government has been a drop in **political efficacy**, a citizen's capacity to understand and influence political events. Political efficacy has two parts:

- **Internal efficacy** - the ability to understand and take part in political affairs
- **External efficacy** - the belief of the individual that government will respond to his or her personal needs or beliefs.

Most studies find little difference over the last half-century in the levels of internal efficacy in the United States. However, there has been a big change in external efficacy, with most Americans believing that the government is not very responsive to the electorate. The levels dropped steadily during the 1960s and 70s, with many political scientists blaming the Vietnam War and Watergate for the growing belief that government officials operate without much concern for beliefs and concerns of ordinary people. The pattern continues today, and may be one reason that incumbent presidents have had a difficult time getting reelected in recent years.

Americans seem to have come to the conclusion that government is too big and pervasive to be sensitive to individual citizens. However, international studies show that Americans feel significantly higher levels of political efficacy than do citizens of many European nations. Americans are less likely to vote than most Europeans, but they are more likely to sign petitions, work to solve community problems, and regularly discuss politics.

CULTURE WARS

Despite the fact that Americans share broad cultural and political values, some observers believe that conflict has increased since the mid-20th century, so that today we see two cultural camps in this country in constant combat with one another. The country has split on explosive political issues, such as abortion, gay rights, drug use, school prayer, terrorism, and the U.S. role in world affairs. On the one hand, some Americans believe that the United States is subject to relatively unchanging standards that are relatively clear - belief in God, laws of nature, and the United States in general as a force for good in the world. The opposite camp emphasize that legitimate alternatives to these standards do exist, and that the U.S. has at times had a negative - or at best neutral - effect on world affairs.

The question is whether or not these differences of opinion actually amount to a big divide in the broad American political culture. One view is that they do because they strike at the very heart of the meaning of our democracy, but others believe that we are doing what we always have done - argue about how our core values should be implemented.