

# AP American Government

WILSON, CHAPTER 4

## American Political Culture



### 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.

The chief sources of political socialization in the US are the family, religion, information media, and schooling. Once occupation (or income) was a central determinant of political values, but with the spread of higher education, the connection between occupational status (or income) and opinion is no longer quite as close.

The chief source of political identification are race, age, ethnicity, class (in which education is an important component), gender, and region.

Americans are divided by their political ideologies but not along a single liberal-conservative dimension. There are several kinds of issues on which people may take "liberal" or "conservative" positions, and they often do not take the same position on all issues. Just using two kinds of issues—economic and social—it is possible to define four kinds of ideologies. These are pure liberal, pure conservative, libertarian, and populist.

Political elites are much more likely to display a consistent ideology, whether liberal or conservative. Elites are important because they have a disproportionate influence on public policy. They also influence mass opinion through the dissemination of information and the evocation of political norms.

### 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:

- Define what scholars mean by political culture, and list some of the dominant aspects of political culture in the United States.
- Discuss how American citizens compare with those of other countries in their political attitudes.
- 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.
- List the sources of our political attitudes and indicate which are the most important.
- Explain why there are crosscutting cleavages between liberals and conservatives in this country. Assess the significance of race, ethnicity, and gender in explaining political attitudes.
- Define political ideology and give reasons why most Americans do not think ideologically. Summarize the liberal and conservative positions on the economy, civil rights, and political conduct.
- Define internal and external political efficacy, and explain how the level of each of these has varied over the past generations.

## OUTLINE

- I. 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
    1. Distinctive and patterned way of thinking about how political and economic life ought to be carried out
    2. For example, Americans generally believe more strongly in political than in economic equality
  - C. 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)
  - D. Some questions about the U.S. political culture
    1. How do we know people share these beliefs?
      - a) Before polls, beliefs were inferred from books, speeches, political choices etc.
      - b) Personality tests and comparative polling confirm these as 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” and “un-American”
- E. 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. Political system
1. Americans
    - a) Tend to assert rights
    - b) Emphasize individualism, competition, equality, following rules, treating others fairly but impersonally
  2. Cultural differences affect political and economic systems
  3. Danger of overgeneralizing: there are many diverse groups within a culture
  4. Almond and Verba: U.S. and British citizens in 1959/1960 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
  5. 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 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 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. Civic role of religion
1. Americans are highly religious compared to Europeans
  2. Churches, synagogues, mosques and other religious organizations are the country’s major source of volunteer 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 pulpit to promote political change
  3. Candidates for national office in most other contemporary democracies rarely mention religion; drastically different in the U.S.
- III. The sources of 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. Concern with assertion and maintenance of rights has resulted in an adversarial 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) 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) 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. Family 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) 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: success is available to people who work hard
- C. The culture war
1. Cultural classes in America battle over values
  2. 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
  3. Culture conflict animated by deep differences in people’s beliefs about private and public morality—standards that ought to govern individual behavior and social arrangements
  4. Simplify by identifying two cultural “camps”
    - a) Orthodox: morality is as, or more, important than self-expression; morality derives from fixed rules from God
    - b) Progressive: 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 Protestants
  6. Progressives associated with liberal Protestants and those with no strong religious 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 technology 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. Watergate
    - 2. Vietnam
    - 3. Clinton impeachment
  - 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 September 11, 2001 provided reason for extraordinary outburst of patriotic fervor
  - D. In summary:
    - 1. Public confidence likely to ebb and flow with circumstances; support for President and military most likely to fluctuate
    - 2. No dramatic change in confidence in Americans themselves or in the system as a whole
- V. Political efficacy
  - A. Definition: citizen's capacity to understand and influence 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. External 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 big to respond to individual preferences
  - C. Comparison: efficacy is still much higher among Americans than among Europeans
  - D. Conclusion
    - 1. Americans today may not be more alienated...
    - 2. ...but simply more realistic
- 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 assent in abstract
    - 2. Most Americans would deny these rights in concrete cases
    - 3. Americans are generally becoming more tolerant
    - 4. Many people still fear that the nation is too tolerant of harmful behaviors which leads many people to defend common moral 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 beliefs

2. Officeholders and activists 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

## VVII. Political Socialization; The Family

- A. The role of family
  1. Party identification of family absorbed, although the child becomes more independent-thinking with time
  2. In recent years, there has been a declining ability to pass on party identification
  3. Younger voters exhibit less partisanship; they are more likely to be independent
  4. Meaning of the partisanship that children acquire from their parents is unclear; children are less influenced by parents in regard to policy preferences
  5. Clear political ideologies are passed on in only a few families
- B. Religion
  1. Families form and transmit political beliefs through their religious tradition
  2. Differences between religions are quite complicated, and vary with particular issues
    - a) Religious influences on public opinion are most pronounced with respect to social issues
    - b) Religious influence on opinion is much less pronounced on non-social issues (e.g., the war in Iraq)
- C. The gender gap
  1. The difference in political views between men and women
    - a) Men have become increasingly Republican since the mid-1960s
    - b) Women have continued to identify with the Democratic Party at approximately the same rate since the early 1950s
    - c) Reflects attitudinal differences between men and women, about the size of government, gun control, social programs, and gay rights
  2. Not clear whether gender gap is as large for Hispanics as it is for African Americans and whites
- D. Schooling and information
  1. From 1920s through 1960s, studies showed college education had liberalizing effect, possibly because of exposure to liberalizing elites
  2. Contemporary college students' opinions are more complicated
    - a) 18-24 year-olds favorably disposed toward public sector, but not consistently in favor of smaller government
    - b) Belief in individual choice on a range of issues may be college students' axial political opinion
    - c) In the last generation, increased schooling has not been associated with increased political participation
  3. Liberalization of previous generations probably attributable to increased reading of political information; contemporary college students less apt to read newspapers and news magazines than their predecessors

## VVIII. Cleavages in public opinion

- A. Social class: ill-defined in U.S., though recognized in specific cases (e.g., truck drivers and investment bankers)
  1. Social class less important in U.S. than in Europe; extent of cleavage has declined in both places
  2. Class voting has declined sharply since the 1940s, in the U.S. and in several other West European nations.

3. Class differences remain: unskilled workers are more likely to be Democrats than affluent white-collar workers
  4. Noneconomic issues now define liberal and conservative
  5. Moral, symbolic, and foreign-policy issues do not divide the rich and poor in the same way.
- B. Race and ethnicity
1. African Americans
    - a) Similarities and differences between Blacks and Whites are complex, but there is some evidence that they may be narrowing
    - b) Generational differences also surface among African Americans; younger Blacks less likely to believe that social and economic differences between the races are due to discrimination
    - c) Differences of opinion surface between black leaders and black citizens (similar to those between white leaders and white citizens)
  2. Latinos and Asians
    - a) Latinos tend to identify as Democrats, though not as strongly as African Americans
    - b) Asians are even more identified with the Republican party than are whites
    - c) Asian opinion on issues of order more like Anglo opinion than like Black or Hispanic opinion
    - d) Latinos are somewhat more liberal than Anglos or Asians, but less liberal than African Americans
    - e) Important differences within “Asian” and “Hispanic” groups
- C. Region
1. White southerners were once more conservative than other regions regarding aid to minorities, legalizing marijuana, school busing, and rights of the accused
  2. White southerners were similar to other regions regarding economic issues
  3. Historically, the South is more accommodating to business interests (and less accommodating to organized labor) than the North
  4. Southerners now significantly less Democratic than they were for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century
- IX. Political ideology
- A. Definition: a more or less consistent set of beliefs about what policies government ought to pursue
1. Measured in two ways:
    - a) Seeing how frequently people use broad political categories to describe or justify their own views and preferences
    - b) Seeing to what extent a citizen’s policy preferences are consistent over time or are based on consistent principles
  2. Great majority of Americans do not think ideologically
- B. Consistent attitudes
1. Yet, people may have strong predispositions even if they do not satisfy the condition of being “ideological”
  2. One may be ideological by crossing the borders of traditional liberalism or conservatism in their issue affiliations
- C. What do “liberalism” and “conservatism” mean?
1. Liberal and conservative labels have a complex history
    - a) Early 1800s: liberals supported personal, economic liberty; conservatives wanted to restore the power of the state, church, and aristocracy
    - b) Roosevelt and the New Deal began to change this definition, so liberalism began to mean support for an activist government

- c) Conservative reaction to activism (Goldwater): favored free market, states' rights, and individual choice in economics
  - d) Today's meanings are imprecise, but still reflect important differences within and between the parties
- D. Various categories of public opinion
  - 1. Economic policy: liberals favor jobs for all, subsidized medical care and education, increased taxation of the rich
  - 2. Civil rights: liberals favor strong federal action to desegregate schools, create hiring opportunities for minorities, and strict enforcement of civil rights law
  - 3. Public and political conduct: liberals are tolerant of protest demonstrations, favor legalization of marijuana, emphasize protecting the rights of the accused, and respond to crime by seeking to eliminate its causes
- E. Analyzing consistency: people mix liberal and conservative positions on these categories
  - 1. Would actually need nine categories to reflect "mix and match" liberalism and conservatism on three issue areas; liberal-conservative structure doesn't reflect this complexity
  - 2. Focus on economic policy and personal conduct for simplicity; construct 4 categories
    - a) Pure liberals: liberal on both economic and personal conduct issues
    - b) Pure conservatives: conservative on both economic and personal conduct issues
    - c) Libertarians: conservative on economic issues, liberal on personal conduct issues
    - d) Populists: liberal on economic issues, conservative on personal conduct issues
- F. Political elites
  - 1. Definition: those who have a disproportionate amount of some valued resource
  - 2. Elites, (usually known as activists) display greater ideological consistency
    - a) They have more information and more interest in politics than most people, so they may see more relationships among the issues
    - b) Their peers reinforce this consistency
- X. Political elites, public opinion, and public policy
  - A. Elites influence public opinion in two ways
    - 1. Raise and frame political issues
    - 2. State norms by which to settle issues and define policy options
  - B. Limits to elite influence on the public
    - 1. Elites do not define economic, crime, and other problems that are rooted in personal experience.
- 2. Elites contradict and disagree with one another, limiting their influence.