

Chapter 4

American Political Culture

REVIEWING THE CHAPTER

CHAPTER FOCUS

This chapter departs rather sharply from the previous ones, which focused on the legal and historical aspects of American government, and 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, you 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 U.S. citizens compare with those of other countries in their political attitudes.
3. List the contributions to U.S. political culture made by the Revolution, by the nation's religious heritages, and by the family. Explain the apparent absence of class consciousness in this country.
4. Explain why some observers are quite concerned about the growth of mistrust in government and why others regard this mistrust as normal and healthy.
5. Define internal and external feelings of *political efficacy*, and explain how the level of each of these has varied over the past generation.
6. Explain why a certain level of political tolerance is necessary in the conduct of democratic politics, and review the evidence that indicates just how much political tolerance exists in this country. Agree or disagree with the text's conclusion that no group is truly free of political intolerance.

STUDY OUTLINE

I. Introduction

- A. Generalizations about countries can vary, even when they are all representative democracies
- B. Culture counts when it comes to politics and government

II. Political culture

A. Constitutional differences

1. Can be fairly obvious and easy to summarize
2. Institutions, features of government and power relationships vary

B. Demographic differences

1. Also pretty straightforward
2. Language, race, ethnicity, religion, etc.

C. Cultural differences

1. Distinctive patterned ways of thinking about how political and economic life ought to be carried out
2. Notions of political and economic equality vary from one nation to the next

3. Sometimes the differences are quite sharp despite constitutional similarities
4. Explanations?
 - a) Abundant and fertile soil for democracy to grow
 - b) No feudal aristocracy; minimal taxes; few legal restraints
 - c) Westward movement; vast territory provided opportunities
 - d) Nation of small, independent farmers
 - e) Tocqueville: “moral and intellectual characteristics” today called political culture

III. American political culture

A. Five important elements in the American view of the political system

1. Liberty
2. Democracy
3. Equality
4. Civic duty
5. Individual responsibility

B. Some questions about the U.S. political culture

1. How do we know people share these beliefs?
Before polls, beliefs inferred from books, speeches, and so on
2. How do we explain behavior inconsistent with beliefs?
Beliefs still important, source of change
3. Why so much political conflict in U.S. history?
Conflict occurs even with beliefs in common
4. Most consistent evidence of political culture
Use of terms Americanism, un-American

C. The economic system

1. Americans support free enterprise but see limits on marketplace freedom
2. Americans prefer equality of opportunity to equality of result; individualist view
3. Americans have a shared commitment to economic individualism/self-reliance (see 1924 and 1977 polls)

IV. Comparing citizens of the United States with those of other nations

A. Political system

1. Swedes: more deferential than participatory
 - a) Defer to government experts and specialists
 - b) Rarely challenge governmental decisions
 - c) Believe in what is best more than what people want
 - d) Value equality over liberty
 - e) Value harmony and observe obligations
2. Japanese
 - a) Value good relations with colleagues
 - b) Emphasize group decisions and social harmony
 - c) Respect authority
3. Americans
 - a) Tend to assert rights
 - b) Emphasize individualism, competition, equality, following rules, treating others fairly (compare with the Japanese)
4. Cultural differences affect political and economic systems
5. Danger of over generalizing: many diverse groups within a culture
6. Classic study: U.S. and British citizens in cross-national study
 - a) Stronger sense of civic duty, civic competence
 - b) Institutional confidence

- c) Sense of patriotism
- B. Economic system
 - 1. Swedes (contrasted with Americans): Verba and Orren
 - a) Equal pay and top limit on incomes
 - b) Less income inequality
 - 2. Cultural differences make a difference in politics: private ownership in United States versus public ownership in European countries
- C. The civic role of religion
 - 1. Americans are highly religious compared with Europeans
 - 2. Impact on individual behavior
 - a) Donation of money to charity
 - b) Volunteer work
 - 3. Impact on political system and processes
 - a) Religious movements transformed American politics and fueled the break with England
 - b) Both liberals and conservatives use the pulpit to promote political change
 - c) Candidate support for faith based approaches to social ills
 - d) The Pledge of Allegiance and American political culture
- V. The sources of political culture
 - A. Historical roots
 - 1. Revolution essentially over liberty; preoccupied with asserting rights
 - 2. Adversarial culture the result of distrust of authority and a belief that human nature is depraved
 - 3. Federalist-Jeffersonian transition in 1800 legitimated the role of the opposition party; liberty and political change can coexist
 - B. Legal-sociological factors
 - 1. Widespread participation permitted by the Constitution
 - 2. Absence of an established national religion
 - a) Religious diversity a source of cleavage
 - b) Absence of established religion has facilitated the absence of political orthodoxy
 - c) Puritan heritage (dominant one) stress on personal achievement
 - (1) Hard work
 - (2) Save money
 - (3) Obey secular law
 - (4) Do good
 - (5) Embrace "Protestant ethic"
 - d) Miniature political systems produced by churches' congregational organization
 - 3. Family instills the ways we think about world and politics
 - a) Great freedom of children
 - b) Equality among family members
 - c) Rights accorded each person
 - d) Varied interests considered
 - 4. Class consciousness absent
 - a) Most people consider themselves middle class
 - b) Message of Horatio Alger stories is still popular
 - C. The culture war
 - 1. Two cultural classes in America battle over values
 - a) Orthodox: morality, with rules from God, more important than self-expression
 - b) Progressive: personal freedom, with rules based on circumstances, more important than tradition

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 – animated by deep differences in people’s beliefs about private and public morality
3. Two views of the culture war
 - a) Fiorina – war is myth, political leaders are polarize, but not the public
 - b) Abramowitz – war is real, issues matter more and more, political engagement more common

VI. Mistrust of government

A. What the polls say

1. Since the 1950s, a steady decline in percentage who say they trust the government in Washington
2. Important qualifications and considerations
 - a) Levels of trust rose briefly during the Reagan administration
 - b) Distrust of officials is not the same as distrust for our system of government
 - c) Americans remain more supportive of the country and its institutions than most Europeans

B. Possible causes of apparent decline in confidence

1. Vietnam
2. Watergate and Nixon’s resignation
3. Clinton’s sex scandals and impeachment
4. War in Iraq
5. Levels of support may have been abnormally high in the 1950s
 - a) Aftermath of victory in World War II and possession of Atomic bomb
 - b) From Depression to currency that dominated international trade
 - c) Low expectations of Washington and little reason to be upset/disappointed
6. 1960s and 1970s may have dramatically increased expectations of government
7. Decline in patriotism (temporarily affected by the attacks of 9/11)

C. Other factors that might generally affect trust in the government

1. Political efficacy
 - a) Internal – has not changed much since the 1950s and 1960s
 - b) External – fairly steep, steady decline since the 1960s
 - c) Still, our sense of efficacy remains higher than it is among Europeans
2. Social and civic engagement
 - a) Putnam: the nation of “joiners” is increasingly “bowling alone”
 - b) Less socializing, involvement, volunteering, etc.
 - c) Evidence appears mixed

VII. Political tolerance

A. Crucial to democratic politics

1. Citizens must be reasonably tolerant
2. But not necessarily perfectly tolerant

B. Levels of American political tolerance

1. Most Americans assent in abstract, but would deny rights in concrete cases
2. General levels of tolerance appear to be increasing
3. Some considerations
 - a) There may be a thin line between intolerance and civic concern
 - b) For most people, there is some group or cause worthy of restriction
4. Groups less tolerated survive because
 - a) Few are willing to act on their beliefs—to restrict the liberties of others

b) No widespread agreement as to which groups should be restricted

c) Courts are sufficiently insulated from public opinion to enforce protections

C. Conclusions

1. Political liberty cannot be taken for granted

2. No group should pretend it is always tolerant

a) Conservatives once targeted professors

b) Later, professors targeted conservatives