Citizens and residents of the United States operate within a political culture. This is a society’s framework of shared values, beliefs, and attitudes concerning politics and government. It is the political environment in which Americans exercise their rights and responsibilities.

Political culture can take many forms and be expressed in many ways. The strong surge of patriotism after the 9/11 terrorist attacks of 2001 was an expression of American political culture. At the time, many Americans flew the flag to show their love of country. In quite a different way, the civil rights protests of the 1950s and 1960s were also an expression of American political culture. The millions of Americans who supported the civil rights movement shared the belief that all citizens should enjoy equal rights and opportunities.

Americans’ Shared Political Values

Although Americans often disagree on specific issues, they share a number of core beliefs and values. These beliefs, some of which are listed below, shape our political culture. Keep in mind that individuals may vary in terms of their attachment to these core values.

Liberty. Americans believe that they are entitled to the greatest amount of liberty possible as long as they do no harm to others. They firmly believe that citizens should be able to express their views openly, without fear of punishment by the government.

Equality. Americans embrace equality of opportunity, without regard to race, religion, or gender. They believe that all citizens should enjoy the right to vote, to receive an education, to have a job, and to succeed in life.

Democracy. Americans support a democratic system of government. They believe that political authority comes from the people and that public officials should be accountable to the voters. The importance of majority rule and the protection of minority rights are important related beliefs.

Individualism. Americans believe in personal freedom and personal responsibility. As a general rule, they believe that every citizen is responsible for his or her own actions and well-being. This contrasts with the more collective view in some countries, where greater emphasis is placed on the government’s role in meeting people’s needs.

Free enterprise. Americans support capitalism and a free-market economy in which private businesses compete with relatively limited regulation by government. They accept the fact that such a system creates winners and losers in terms of wealth and economic status.

Justice and the rule of law. Americans believe that society should be governed by a system of laws that are fairly and equally applied. They believe that the rights of ordinary citizens should not be arbitrarily restricted or infringed on by government.

Patriotism. Americans feel great pride and loyalty toward their country. Many believe that the United States is the greatest nation in the world. They also take pride in the values of American democracy.

Optimism. In general, Americans are upbeat and optimistic. They see themselves as “can-do” people. They tend to believe that their lives and life in general will be better in the future.

Civic duty. Americans believe that for democracy to flourish, citizens should vote and participate in civic and political affairs. Many also see volunteering for military service or giving back to their communities through volunteer activities as an aspect of civic duty.
Two Widely Held Ideologies: Liberalism and Conservatism

Although Americans share a common political culture, they do not all hold to the same ideology [ideology: a basic set of political beliefs about the roles of government and the individual in society], or basic political beliefs. For example, they often disagree on the role government should play with respect to economic policy and moral values. The most widely held ideologies in U.S. politics today are held by Americans who define themselves as liberals or conservatives.

Liberalism [liberalism: an ideology favoring an active role for government in efforts to solve society’s problems] is an ideology that favors an active role for the government in solving society’s problems. Liberals generally support government efforts to regulate business and the economy. They support policies designed to reduce economic inequality and to help the poor. They also favor the use of government regulation to protect the environment and improve the health care system.

As their name suggests, liberals strongly defend liberty and resist government efforts to interfere in people’s personal lives. On a political spectrum, with moderates in the middle, liberals are said to be “left of center.” They tend to associate themselves with the Democratic Party.

Conservatism [conservatism: an ideology favoring a limited role for government and more private initiative by nongovernmental groups in efforts to solve society’s problems], on the other hand, is an ideology that calls for a limited role for government in economic affairs. Conservatives generally oppose government regulation of business. Most want to limit the size of government, reduce taxes, and cut back on government programs. Instead, they look to private initiative, or efforts by nongovernmental groups such as religious congregations, charities, service organizations, and businesses, to deal with many of society’s problems.

In contrast to liberals, conservatives are more likely to support government action on moral issues. Conservatives are said to be “right of center” on the political spectrum. They generally associate themselves with the Republican Party.

Over the past few decades, more Americans have identified themselves as conservatives than as liberals. Since the late 1960s, the percentage of self-identified conservatives has varied from 30 to 40 percent. The percentage of people calling themselves liberal has remained more constant, at around 20 percent. This graph compares the percentages of liberals, conservatives, and moderates in 2011.
Three Other Ideologies: Socialism, Libertarianism, and Environmentalism

Three other ideologies—socialism, libertarianism (libertarianism: an ideology based on a strong belief in personal freedom and a minimal role for government), and environmentalism (environmentalism: an ideology that emphasizes conservation and protection of the environment)—also play a role in American politics. Although these ideologies have fewer followers than liberalism and conservatism, they have inspired and motivated many people over the years.

Socialism. The oldest of these ideologies is socialism. The main goal of socialism is to limit economic inequality by ensuring a fair distribution of wealth. In a socialist system, the government owns or controls most of the economic resources needed for the production of goods and services. In theory, a socialist government manages the economy in a way that benefits the majority of citizens.

In 1901, reformers and workers who believed in socialism formed the Socialist Party of America. The party’s greatest electoral success came in 1912 when its presidential candidate, Eugene Debs, won nearly a million votes. That was just 6 percent of the total votes cast, but it was a substantial showing for a socialist candidate. After World War I, however, membership in the Socialist Party declined.

Liberalism and conservatism are the dominant political ideologies in the United States. The significance of the two-party system has created factions within the Democratic and Republican parties. For example, politician Ron Paul ran for U.S. president in 1988 as Libertarian. He joined the Republican Party before running for president in 2008 and 2012, but maintained his libertarian views as a Republican.

Socialism never became as popular in the United States as it did in other countries, in part because it conflicted with America’s political culture. A strong faith in capitalism and the free enterprise system made most Americans leery of socialists’ call for government control of economic resources.

Most American socialists today support what is known as democratic socialism (democratic socialism: an ideology that advocates socialism as a basis for the economy and democracy as a governing principle). This is an ideology that advocates socialism as a basis for the economy and democracy as a governing principle. In countries that have adopted this ideology, elected leaders supervise a “mixed economy” of public and private industry.

Libertarianism. Modern libertarianism is an ideology based on a strong belief in personal freedom. A 2012 statement of libertarian principles began with these words:

As Libertarians, we seek a world of liberty; a world in which all individuals are sovereign over their own lives and no one is forced to sacrifice his or her values for the benefit of others.

—National Platform of the Libertarian Party, 2012
Libertarians tend to be conservative on economic issues and liberal on social issues. For example, they favor lower taxes and a free-market economy, while opposing bans on abortion or gay marriage. Libertarians want a small government and resist government regulation of any kind.

Formed in 1971, the Libertarian Party has attracted a small but loyal following. According to Pew Research Center, 9 percent of Americans had libertarian beliefs in 2011. Libertarian candidates regularly run for office in local, state, and national elections. So far their success has been limited to the local level, where they have won election to such positions as mayor, city council member, and sheriff.

Environmentalism. This last ideology, environmentalism, unites Americans who are deeply concerned about conservation and protection of the environment. Environmentalists advocate policies designed to reduce pollution and preserve natural resources. In contrast to libertarians, they support government regulation of industry and the economy to achieve those ends.

Many members of conservation organizations such as the Sierra Club and Friends of the Earth identify themselves as environmentalists. So do members of the Green Party of the United States. “Greens” are committed to what they call “ecological and economic sustainability.” By this they mean meeting the needs of the world’s people today without damaging the ability of future generations to provide for themselves. As their party platform states,

*We support a sustainable society which utilizes resources in such a way that future generations will benefit and not suffer from the practices of our generation. To this end we must practice agriculture which replenishes the soil; move to an energy efficient economy; and live in ways that respect the integrity of natural systems.*


Like the Libertarian Party, the Green Party has been most successful in electing candidates at the local level. The party is stronger in Europe, however, and has won national offices in a number of countries.
The Moderates in the Middle: Centrism
Most Americans don’t fit neatly into any ideological camp. They consider themselves moderates, or middle-of-the-road voters. These are people who sit at the center of the political spectrum, between the ideologies of left and right. In recent years, U.S. politics have become more polarized, meaning that political parties have adopted more extreme policies. The Republican Party has grown more conservative, and the Democratic Party more liberal. This polarization is especially evident in the current Congress, which remains divided on a number of issues. These strong divisions often push voters to be drawn to centrism. Many surveys show that moderates, along with people who describe themselves as slightly conservative or slightly liberal, make up the largest group of U.S. voters. In contrast to people with a strong ideological point of view, centrists may hold a mix of liberal, conservative, and perhaps environmental views. Centrism is not an ideology with its own political party. As a result, during election time, centrists often cross party lines, depending on the candidates and issues of the day.

Activity:

1. Which shared political value do you feel is most important to the American way of life, and why?

2. Read the following terms: liberalism, conservatism, socialism, libertarianism, environmentalism, and centrism. For each term,

   • Include a short definition or explanation of the ideology.

   • Rate the ideology on a scale of 1 ("I identify most closely with this ideology") to 6 ("I do not identify with this ideology").