

8 Foundations of American Democracy

American Political Culture

POLITICAL CULTURE: THE CORE PRINCIPLES OF AMERICAN GOVERNMENT

American ideals are the basis of their **national identity**. Americans are **linked**, not by their common ancestry, but by **political tradition** that began in 1776. This strong bond amongst Americans was born out of **necessity**, as their ancestors, often rivals in Europe, had to live together in the New World. As they arrived during the Enlightenment period, when people were awakening to the ideal of human progress, they wanted **freedom** to practice **religion** and they desired **self-government**.

Today, the United States has a population of almost **325 million people**, nearly all of whom can trace their ancestry to some other place. Therefore, **unity** or oneness is key, as Americans become uniquely American - pledging allegiance to **one common set of ideals** such as liberty and equality. They are part of what social scientists call **political culture**, a term referring to the characteristics and **innate beliefs** of a particular people about **government** and **politics**. This culture was not entirely original however, as it borrowed from European thought and practice, which was itself influenced by Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian traditions. Colonial life expanded their vision, which then expressed in the Declaration of Independence (1776) and the Constitution (1787).

I. 6 CORE AMERICAN VALUES

1. Liberty (L)
2. Equality (E)
3. Self-Government (S)
4. Individualism (I)
5. Diversity (D)
6. Unity (U)

America's ideals **place the individual ahead of the government**. Government exists to **serve the people**. This notion is clearest in the **Declaration of Independence**, when it states that the individual has "**inalienable rights**" - **freedoms** that **belong** to each **person** and **cannot lawfully be denied** by government.

Review the following documents:

(Thomas Jefferson - <http://oll.libertyfund.org/quote/327>);

(John Locke - <http://oll.libertyfund.org/quotes/497>)

(Declaration of Independence - <http://www.ushistory.org/declaration/document/>)

- **Liberty** is the principle that individuals should be **free to act** and **think** as they choose, provided *they do not infringe upon the rights and freedoms of others*. This is solidified by the **First Amendment** to the U.S. Constitution, which states that "Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof, or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press, or the right of the people to peaceably assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."

- **Equality** is the notion that all **individuals** are **equal** in their **moral worth** and are entitled to **equal treatment** under the law. Thomas Jefferson professed in the Declaration of Independence, “We hold these truths to be self evident that all men are created equal.” (At that time however, women, slaves, and men without property did not share the same rights. Therefore, throughout time, there has been ongoing debate over what equality means. Does it require that wealth and opportunity be widely shared? Or, does it merely require that artificial barriers to advancement be removed?) This core value is at the heart of Civil Rights and Civil Liberties debates today.
- **Self-Government** is the principle that **people** are the ultimate **source of governing authority** and must have a **voice** in how they are governed. The Declaration of Independence proclaims that “Governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed.”
- **Individualism** is the commitment to **personal initiative, self-sufficiency, and material accumulation**. It stems from the belief that **people**, if **free** to pursue their own path and not unfairly burdened, can **attain** their **fullest potential**. It has roots in early wilderness society, where early Americans developed a pride in their “rugged individualism,” (Herbert Hoover) and from this grew the idea that people ought to try to make it on their own.
- **Unity** is the principle that **one people** and form an **indivisible union**. *E Pluribus Unum* (one out of many)
- **Diversity** holds that individual and group **differences** should be **respected** and that these differences are themselves a source of **strength**.

The Power and Limits of our 6 Core Values

Our values serve to define the boundaries of action. They do not determine exactly what people will do, but they affect what people will regard as reasonable and desirable. For example, the U.S. spends relatively less money on government programs for the poor than do other fully industrialized democracies not because there is less need, but because of its value emphasis on liberty and individualism. On the other hand, biases and discrimination have hindered the true realization of our values. For example, slavery, Chinese immigration, women’s right, etc.

II. POLITICS

Politics is the **process** by which a society **settles its conflicts**. Political **conflict** has **two** primary **sources**:

1. **Scarcity** Even the richest societies do not have enough wealth to satisfy everyone’s desires. Conflict over the distribution of resources is the result.
2. **Differences in values** exist because people see issues differently. Each person has differences in what they believe, experience, and are interested in. People have a wide range of conflicting standards about issues like abortion, the environment, crime and punishment, the poor, the economy, etc.

A. The Road to The Social Contract - In *Leviathan* (1651), English philosopher, **Thomas Hobbes**, argued for **absolute rule**. He said that government rests on a social contract in which ordinary people surrender the freedom they would have in a state of nature in return for the protection that a sovereign ruler can provide. He said that **people give up their freedom** because life in its natural state is “nasty, brutish, and short” - the **weak** are constantly **preyed upon** by the strong. Thus, people seek the protection of a strong ruler whom they must obey, even if the ruler turns out to be cruel. **John Locke**, an English philosopher, argued against Hobbes’ notion of absolutism. In his *Second Treatise on Civil Government* (1690), Locke claimed that all **individuals** have certain **natural rights** (inalienable rights), including **life, liberty, and property**, and that such rights **belonged to the people** in their natural state before government was created. When people come together in order to have the protection that only organized government can provide, their natural rights are neither taken from them by government nor surrendered to them by government. People enter into a **social contract**, in that **they agree to be governed**, and in order to **safeguard their rights and property**. The **government**, in turn, is obliged to **provide this protection**, and if it fails to do so, people can rightfully rebel against it and **create a new government**. Seventy-five years later, the French philosopher, **Jean Jacques Rousseau**, extended the idea of a social contract to include **popular sovereignty** in *Social Contract* (1762). He **opposed absolute rule**, saying that “man was born free, but everywhere he is in chains.” He claimed that people would willingly accept in its place is one that governs with their consent and for their benefit. The **only legitimate government** is one that **serves** the people’s common interest, or “general will.” All of these ideas were then embodied in the Constitution of the United States.

B. The Rules of American Politics

There are 3 rules of American politics. They establish a **political process** that is intended to **promote self-government**, defend **individual rights**, and **protect property**.

1. **Democracy** is a set of rules intended to give **ordinary people** a significant **voice in government**. It is a form of government in which the people govern, either directly or through elected representatives (majority rule through elections).
2. **Constitutionalism** is a set of rules that **restricts** the lawful use of power. In its original sense, constitutionalism in Western society referred to a government based on laws and constitutional powers. In a constitutional system, officials govern according to law, and citizens have basic rights that government cannot take away or deny. The United States main body of law is the **U.S. Constitution**.
3. **Capitalism** is a set of rules that states that the **government** should interfere with the **economy as little as possible**. Free enterprise, private property, and self-reliance are the main principles of capitalism. Businesses should operate in a **free and open marketplace**, and they will produce and price what they wish, and consumers will decide what they will buy at what price.

III. POLITICAL POWER & POLICY

Individuals who decide how society will be governed have power. **Power** refers to the ability of persons or institutions to control public policy. **Public policy** is a **decision by government** to follow a **course of action** designed to produce a particular outcome.

Power: Power is derived from many different sources. In a totalitarian or authoritarian government, power is derived from the leader. In a democracy, power is derived from the people. In James Madison's **Federalist No. 10**, he argues that **government is most dangerous** when a **single group** is **powerful** enough to gain **full political control**. He states that when the single group gains full political control, it will **use government to further its interests** at the **expense** of all others. Madison called this single groups **factions**.

Theories of Power: There is **no one single theory** of how power in America is held and exercised. Instead, there are 4 theories that combine to form the American political system.

1. **Majoritarianism:** the notion that the majority rules, not only in the counting of votes, but also in the determination of public policy.
2. **Pluralism:** the notion that groups rule, and that as special interests form to dominate particular policy areas. This is also known as interest group politics.
3. **Elitism:** the notion that a small number of well-positioned, highly influential individuals (the wealthy) control policy. (C.Wright Mills, *The Power Elite*, 1956)
4. **Bureaucratic Rule:** the notion that power rests in the hands of career government bureaucrats. It is those government administrators whose experience and knowledge of policy issues exceed those of elected officials that hold the power.