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AMERICAN CITIZENS AND POLITICAL CULTURE

What’s at Stake . . . in Our Immigration Policy?

DONALD TRUMP opened his campaign for the presidency in 2015 with a dramatic descent down an escalator in Trump Tower, followed by a speech best remembered for the words denouncing immigration: “When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best . . . . They’re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with us. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.” He followed that up by vowing to build a “huge, beautiful wall” between the United States and Mexico, and forcing Mexico to pay for it. By the 2018 midterm elections he was warning that foreign caravans filled with terrorists and murderers were coming north to “invade our borders.”

It’s hard to imagine that only eight years ago, immigration reform looked like the biggest no-brainer on earth. The Republicans had lost the 2012 presidential election by almost five million votes, and the powers that be in the party concluded that immigration reform was central to a future presidential win for the party.
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ferent narratives about who we are as a nation. Neither

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reform bill with a vote of 68–32. The bill provided for the Senate, with a bipartisan majority scarcely heard of in these polarized times, passed an extensive immigration message and Democrats were on board too. In June 2013, Other Republicans, especially business leaders, echoed that he was never able to find his way back to the middle. The party leadership, meeting after the election to assess the damage, determined that that had to change.1

The other origin story, so to speak, is that we are a multicultural nation in which each individual ethnic and religious identity should be preserved and honored, lest its distinctive nature be lost. The first vision sees the effect of immigration as something that should disappear, leaving only generic “Americans”; the other sees it as worthy of recognition and celebration. We learned in Chapter 1 that being able to get one’s preferred narrative accepted is a form of political power, and that is certainly the case with those who are promoting these competing narratives about the United States as a vast

The Horror of Kids in Cages
Reforms that would provide undocumented immigrants with a path to citizenship have stalled repeatedly in Congress and provide one of the biggest sources of conflict in American politics today. This pop-up art installation depicting a small child curled up underneath a foil survival blanket in a chain-link cage was erected on a Brooklyn, New York, street in June 2019. Representing migrant children in U.S. Border Patrol custody, the cages were placed in front of the offices of various news organizations and other public spaces in Brooklyn and Manhattan and were eventually taken away by police.

After all, Mitt Romney had won the votes of only 27 percent of Latinos—a group that was 10 percent of the electorate in 2012 and sure to get bigger. Immigration reform is an important issue to the Latino community, but, unfortunately for the Republican Party, its base rejects any solution other than returning the estimated eleven million undocumented immigrants in the United States to their home countries. To get the presidential nomination, Romney had run so far to the right, talking about something he called “self deportation,” that he was never able to find his way back to the middle. The party leadership, meeting after the election to assess the damage, determined that that had to change.1

Other Republicans, especially business leaders, echoed that message and Democrats were on board too. In June 2013, the Senate, with a bipartisan majority scarcely heard of in these polarized times, passed an extensive immigration reform bill with a vote of 68–32. The bill provided for tougher border security measures but also for a thirteen-year path to citizenship for those in this country without proper documentation. The ball was in then–Speaker of the House John Boehner’s court.

And there it sat. Any path to citizenship for those who had initially broken the law by their arrival in this country was too much for conservative Republicans who had scuttled Boehner’s legislative plans many times before. When limited immigration reform finally came, it was done by President Barack Obama, who took executive action without Congress to single-handedly defer the deportation of young undocumented immigrants who had been brought to this country as small children, and to similarly spare the parents of citizens or legal residents from being deported and to allow them to apply for work permits. In September 2017, the Trump administration canceled the Obama policy, leaving thousands of young people in legal limbo. A year later, in November 2018, the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals upheld a previous ruling that blocked Trump’s action, making it likely that the issue will end up in the Supreme Court.3

In fact, it was as if the Republican angst over the issue had never been. In 2016 and the midterms two years later, the Republican candidates were once again running to the right, vying to outdo each other in their promises to voters that they would remove every undocumented immigrant from the country. Donald Trump affirmed his intention to secure the nation’s borders with a “beautiful wall” and was furious with Congress for not including its full cost in their budget. His administration took a harder line on deportations, with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security’s Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) deporting many long-time residents who did not have documentation.4

On the other side, Democrats were once again promising reform with a path to citizenship. When the vote totals were counted in November 2016 and 2018, the Latino vote was again lopsided, helping solidify the partisan division between the more diverse Democratic Party and the whiter, older Republicans.

How had immigration come to be such a toxic issue for Republicans and such a difficult challenge for the country as a whole? How had immigration reform gone from a win-win sure thing to a no-win risk? Had the Republicans changed their minds about the importance of immigration reform, or did they know (or care) that they were committing electoral suicide? Why was there no risk for the Democrats in promising a path to citizenship for undocumented workers? What was at stake for all these actors in passing—or not passing—immigration reform? ❯

INTRODUCTION

OVER the years, American schoolchildren have grown up hearing two conflicting narratives about who we are as a nation. Neither disputes that we are nation of immigrants, but they tell very different stories about the consequences of immigration. The first, that we are a melting pot, implies that the United States is a vast cauldron into which go many cultures and ethnicities, all of which are boiled down into some sort of homogenized American stew.

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The United States is a big country, so when we talk about American politics, we are usually talking about huge numbers: of people, of votes, of incomes, of ages, of policy preferences or opinions. Statistics are bandied about every day in the media. Depending on the source, they can be used as evidence to support arguments about everything from baseball to gun control. As critical consumers of American politics, it’s crucial that we be able to sort through the barrage of numbers thrown at us daily through multiple media channels—to interpret their meaning, judge their veracity, and make sense of the ways in which they are displayed.

What to Watch Out For

- **Pay attention to the baseline.** When looking at a line graph or bar chart, take time to scrutinize the way numbers are plotted on the axes. Typically the numbers that go up the vertical axis begin at zero and move up at regular intervals. The real relationship between the numbers on each axis can be disguised, however, if the baseline is not zero—especially if it is below zero. Do not take for granted that you know what the baseline is. Check the scale or timeframe plotted on the axes, too. A set of numbers (for example, the Dow Jones Industrial Average) can look erratic over a series of hours, days, or even weeks, but when the data are plotted over years, patterns seem more predictable and far less volatile.
- **Remember the difference between the median and the mean.** Back in middle school, you learned that the mean is the average calculated by adding up a series of values and dividing by the number of values. The mean is often used to provide a midrange estimate, but it can be skewed dramatically by outlying values, the ones at the extreme top or bottom. For example, a small influx of multimillionaires moving into an impoverished neighborhood can raise the mean income into the middle-class range—even though many residents are struggling. For this reason, political scientists usually prefer to use the median, calculated by sorting all the values numerically and then finding the one in the physical middle. (For an even number of values, we take the mean of the two middlemost numbers.) In our hypothetical neighborhood study, the median income would show that most residents are near the poverty line, even though a few residents live far, far above it.
- **Notice how the data are broken down.** Statisticians typically break down data into chunks for comparison. For example, you might divide a population into five or seven segments, to see how they differ in terms of earnings, grades, and so on. But the way those data are chunked can skew a graph one way or another. For example, if you wanted to assess income inequality by comparing the incomes of the rich and the poor, you might compare the top 10 percent with the bottom 10 percent and you would find the top group earns about nine times as much as the low-income group. That is a lot, but what if you compare the top 0.1 percent with the same bottom 10 percent group? In this case, the top group makes 184 times as much per household as the bottom group, yielding a much more severe assessment of income inequality.
- **Ask yourself what a graph is not showing you.** Graphs and visual displays can show you only a small part of the picture. Because they are usually limited to just a few variables, there is always more context to consider when you look at them. For example, population charts will often show growth in the numbers of a group without relating the group to the population as a whole. In such cases, a large influx of immigrants or refugees can look dramatic, but if the entire population is growing as well, the percentage of foreign-born people may remain the same.
- **Make sure that graphs focused on prices or money are using constant dollars.** A graph comparing the minimum wage over the past fifty years is useless if it is based on nominal dollars —because a dollar in 2020 buys a lot less than it did in 1965. Whenever a graph deals with prices or money, make sure that values are in constant dollars, which are adjusted for inflation, so that each dollar has a consistent value for all years (some graphs might note the value by a specific year, for example, “in 2016 dollars”).
- **Beware of cause-and-effect claims.** The fact that two variables shift at the same time does not mean that one has caused the other. Causality is difficult to prove, and generally the best you can hope to do is to see if there might be a relationship between two variables.
- **Don’t let the design fool you.** Numbers may have concrete meaning, but design choices like color, icons, and even typeface can imply meaning beyond what the numbers actually say. In accounting, for example, the color red denotes debt, whereas the color black denotes a favorable balance; in political science, the color red typically refers to the Republican Party, whereas blue refers to the Democratic Party. Any one or a combination of these design elements can intentionally or unintentionally influence the perception of the data when they are visualized.

1. Institute for Policy Studies, “Income Inequality,” inequality.org/income-inequality/.
Chapter 2: American Citizens and Political Culture

By 2050 most of the Baby Boomers will have died, and today’s younger generations will be collecting Social Security; the working population will be predominately non-white. What will this increasing racial and ethnic diversity mean for American politics? What do you think the two political parties will look like in 2050?

American diversity. Not surprisingly, reality, as typically happens, falls somewhere between the two extremes.

The rich diversity of the American people is one of the United States’ greatest strengths, combining talents, tradition, culture, and custom from every corner of the world. Just to take one example, almost half of the current Fortune 500 (Fortune magazine’s list of the nation’s richest companies) were founded by immigrants or their kids. But our diversity has also contributed to some of the nation’s deepest conflicts. We cannot possibly understand the drama that is American politics without an in-depth look at who the actors are that in many ways shape the what and how of politics.

Politics—what we want from government and how we try to get it—stems from who we are. Understanding where American citizens have come from and what they have brought with them, what their lives look like and how they spend their time and money, and what they believe and how they act is critically important to understanding what they choose to fight for politically and how they elect to carry out the fight. As a nation, we have a choice to include those groups with their own stories as valued parts of the national narrative, or to face the tumult of identity politics—political conflicts based on the claims of groups who feel their interests are being ignored or undervalued because of who they are. Identity politics includes not just new immigrant groups but also white Americans whose families have long been here and who see the waves of new immigrants, especially immigrants of color, as threats to their status. In a mediated world, every one of those groups has a chance to speak out and try to create a compelling narrative.

Since we cannot, of course, meet all the Americans out there, we settle for the next best thing: statistics, which provide us with relevant details about a large and complex population. Throughout this book we use statistics, in the form of charts and graphs, to examine the demographic trends that shape our national culture—political and otherwise. We’ll use this information not only to understand better who we are but also to consider how the characteristics, habits, and lives of real people relate to the political issues that shape our society. (Be sure to read Don’t Be Fooled by . . . Big Data for a discussion of the uses and limits of statistics in politics. It will serve you well as you read this book.)

In this chapter’s Snapshots of America, you will see that our population is changing. Older people, whose pensions and nursing home care must be funded, compete for scarce resources with younger families, who want better schools and health care for children, and with college students, who want cheaper educations and better terms for their loans and who have a longer term investment in how we care for the environment. The white population in the United States will soon be outnumbered by ethnic and racial minority populations that traditionally support affirmative action, changes in law enforcement, immigration reform, and other social policies (less popular with whites) designed to protect them and raise them up from the lower end of the socioeconomic scale (see Snapshot of America: Who Are We and Who Will We Be By 2050?). As a result of these demographic changes, the prospect of becoming a minority population has some whites feeling threatened and fearful about the future of the country, sometimes feeling like strangers in their own towns.5 Our population is in constant flux, and every change in the makeup of the people brings a change in what we try to get from government and how we try to get it.

As you look at these depictions of the American people and American life, try to imagine the political complexities that arise from such incredible diversity. How can a single government represent the interests of people with such varied backgrounds, needs, and preferences? How does who we are affect what we want and how we go about getting it?

In Your Own Words Identify the two conflicting origin narratives of the United States as a nation.

WHO IS AN AMERICAN?

Native-born and naturalized citizens

In Chapter 1 we said that citizenship exacts obligations from individuals and also confers rights on them. We saw that the American concept of citizenship contains both self-interested and public-spirited elements, and is challenged in new ways by the mediated lives we live. But citizenship is not only a prescription for how governments ought to treat residents and how those residents ought to act; it is also a very precise legal status. A fundamental element of democracy is not just the careful specification of the rights and obligations of citizenship but also an equally careful legal description of just who is a citizen and how that status can be acquired by immigrants who choose to switch their allegiance to a new country. In this section we look at the legal definition of American citizenship and at the long history of immigration that has shaped our body politic.

Should it be possible to lose one’s citizenship under any circumstances?

AMERICAN CITIZENSHIP

American citizens are usually born, not made. If you are born in any of the fifty states or in most overseas U.S. territories, such as Puerto Rico or Guam, you are an American citizen, whether your parents are Americans or not and whether they are here legally or not. This follows the principle of international law called jus soli, which means literally “the right of the soil.” According to another legal principle, jus sanguinis (“the right by blood”), if you are born outside the United States to American parents, you are also an American citizen (or you can become one if you are adopted by American parents). Interestingly, if you are born in the United States but one of your parents holds citizenship in another country, you may be able to hold dual citizenship, depending on that country’s laws. Requirements for

identity politics the assertion of power, or discrimination, by a group—or an appeal for support to a group—based on their common perception of who they are
The Big Picture: How Immigration Has Changed the Face of America

Immigration to the United States reflects both historical events outside our borders and policy decisions made within them. Each wave of arrivals triggered public anxiety about changing demographics, prompting policies that limited the number of incoming immigrants and often targeted specific ethnic or racial groups. We may be a nation of immigrants, but immigrants assimilate quickly, often closing the door behind them.
How Immigrants Fare in Successive Generations

- **Foreign Born (first generation)**
  - Median Household Income
  - Home Ownership Rates
- **2nd Generation (at least one immigrant parent)**
  - Median Household Income: $51,100
  - Home Ownership Rates: 64% 65%
- **3rd Generation and Higher**
  - Median Household Income: $58,100
  - Home Ownership Rates: 18% 13%

Nineteen out of twenty Hispanic children in the United States under the age of 18 were born in the United States and are citizens.

About 45% of Fortune 500 firms were founded by immigrants or their children.


1917 IMMIGRATION ACT: limited immigration from southern and eastern Europe

1917 IMMIGRATION ACT: lifted many restrictions; created immigration "lottery"

1990 IMMIGRATION ACT: mass immigration from Cuba

1990 IMMIGRATION ACT: lifted many restrictions; created immigration "lottery"
U.S. citizenship, particularly as they affect people born outside the country, have changed frequently over time. Since before its birth America has been attractive to immigrants, who are citizens or subjects of another country who come here to live and work. If these immigrants come here legally on permanent resident visas—that is, if they follow the rules and regulations of the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS)—they may be eligible to apply for citizenship through a process called naturalization. Although almost all American citizens have descended from immigrants or were themselves immigrants, they have, ironically, clamored for strict limits on who else can come in behind them (see this chapter’s The Big Picture).

NONIMMIGRANTS

Many people who come to the United States do not come as legal permanent residents. The USCIS refers to these people as nonimmigrants. Some arrive seeking asylum, or protection. These are political refugees, who are allowed into the United States if they face or are threatened with persecution because of their race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinions. As we see in the continuing debate about whether Syrian and other Muslim refugees from Middle Eastern strife should be allowed into the United States, who can be considered a refugee is very much a political decision, and one that can raise security concerns. The USCIS requires that the fear of persecution be “well founded,” and it is itself the final judge of a well-founded fear. Refugees may become legal permanent residents after they have lived here continuously for one year (although there are annual limits on the number who may do so). At that time, they can begin accumulating the in-residence time required to become a citizen, if they wish to do so.

Other people who may come to the United States legally but without official permanent resident status include visitors, foreign government officials, students, international representatives, temporary workers, members of foreign media, and exchange visitors. These people are expected to return to their home countries and not take up permanent residence in the United States.

Undocumented immigrants have arrived here by avoiding the USCIS regulations, usually because they would not qualify for one reason or another. Many come as children and may not even know they do not have the proper papers. American laws have become increasingly harsh with respect to undocumented immigrants, but for years that did not stop them from coming in search of a better life. Even before the 2016 election of President Trump, with his harsh anti-immigrant rhetoric, levels of undocumented immigration had actually fallen off, although this fact does not fit well with many of the prevailing narratives about the issue. In particular, more Mexicans have been leaving the United States, generally to reunite with their families, than have been seeking to enter it.

Even people who are not legal permanent residents of the United States have rights and responsibilities here, just as Americans do when they travel in other countries. The rights that immigrants enjoy are primarily legal protections; they are entitled to due process in the courts (guarantee of a fair trial, right to a lawyer, and so on), and the U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that it is illegal to discriminate against immigrants in the United States. Nevertheless, their rights are limited. They cannot, for instance, vote in our national elections (although some communities allow them to vote in local elections) or decide to live here permanently without permission. In addition, immigrants, even legal ones, are subject to the decisions of the USCIS, which is empowered by Congress to exercise authority in immigration matters.

U.S. IMMIGRATION POLICY

Immigration law is generally made by Congress with the approval of the president. In the wake of September 11, 2001,
security issues came to play a central role in deciding who may enter the country, and new legislation took the federal agency tasked with implementing immigration law out of the Department of Justice, where it was located at the time. The new agency, named the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, was placed under the jurisdiction of the newly formed Department of Homeland Security.

WHOM TO ADMIT

No country, not even the huge United States, can manage to absorb every impoverished or threatened global resident who wants a better or safer life. Deciding whom to admit is a political decision—like all political decisions, it results in winners and losers. Especially when times are tough, nativism, or the belief that the needs of citizens ought to be met before those of immigrants, can take on political force, as it did in Donald Trump’s presidential campaign in 2016. For instance, jobs are just the sort of scarce resource over which political battles are fought. If times are good and unemployment is low, newcomers, who are often willing to do jobs Americans reject in prosperous times, may be welcomed with open arms. When the economy hits hard times, immigration can become a bitter issue among jobless Americans. It’s also the case that immigrants, especially the very young and the very old, are large consumers of social services and community resources. Immigrants do contribute to the economy through their labor and their taxes, but because immigrants are distributed disproportionately throughout the population, some areas find their social service systems more burdened than others, and immigration can be a much more controversial issue in places where immigrants settle. In addition, large numbers of immigrants can change the demographic balance, as we have already seen by the fact that whites will be a minority group in this country by 2050. For some people, being a part of the majority is a status and a source of political power worth fighting for. (See Snapshot of America: What Do Our Two Largest Groups of Immigrants Look Like?)

Nations typically want to admit immigrants who can do things the country’s citizens are unable or unwilling to do. During and after World War II, when the United States wanted to develop a rocket program, German scientists with the necessary expertise were desirable immigrants. At times in our history when our labor force was insufficient for the demands of industrialization and railroad building and when western states wanted larger populations, immigrants were welcomed. Today, immigration law allows for temporary workers to come to work in agriculture when our own labor force falls short or is unwilling to work for low wages. As a rule, however, our official immigration policy expects immigrants to be skilled and financially stable so that they do not become a burden on the American social services system. Remember that politics is about how power and resources are distributed in society; who gets to consume government services is a hotly contested issue.

REGULATING THE BORDER

Some areas of the country, particularly those near the Mexican-American border, like Texas and California, have often had serious problems brought on by unregulated immigration. This is one reason undocumented immigration is a hot-button issue. Communities can find themselves swamped with new residents, often poor and unskilled. Because their children must be educated and they themselves may be entitled to receive social services, they can pose a significant financial burden on those communities. Some undocumented immigrants work off the books, meaning they do not contribute to the tax base. Furthermore, most income taxes are federal, and federal money is distributed back to states and localities to fund social services based on the population count in the U.S. Census. Since undocumented immigrants are understandably reluctant to come forward to be counted, their communities are typically underfunded in that respect as well.

At the same time, many undocumented immigrants act just like citizens, obeying laws, paying taxes, and sending their children to school. Some have lived here for decades, perhaps since they were children themselves, and their own children and grandchildren may be citizens. They are well integrated into their communities, which makes the prospect and challenge of finding and repatriating them a formidable one for those who believe that is the best political solution. It is also
Snapshot of America: What Do Our Two Largest Immigrant Groups Look Like?

**Latino Immigrants**

33% of Latino immigrants are foreign born. The majority (67%) are born in the United States.

**Asian Immigrants**

41% of Asians living in the U.S. were born here. The majority (59%) are foreign born.

**Behind the Numbers**

America is changing. Looking toward the future, we will see growth in the numbers of Asians and Latinos. Will diversity within these groups affect their political cohesion? How will whites, the traditional majority, adapt to their coming minority status?

Why many others think providing some sort of amnesty or path to citizenship is more practical.

Whether motivated by cultural stereotypes, global events, or domestic economic circumstances, Americans have decided at times that we have allowed “enough” immigrants to settle here, or that we are admitting too many of the “wrong” kind of immigrants, and we have encouraged politicians to enact restrictions. When this happens, narratives emerge in which immigrants are scapegoated for the nation’s problems and demonized as a threat to American culture. This occurred from 1882 to 1943 with Chinese immigrants and in the late 1800s and early 1900s with southern and eastern Europeans. Legislation in the 1920s limited immigration by creating a quota system that favored the northern and western nationalities, seen as more desirable immigrants. Today’s debate over undocumented immigration taps into some of the same emotions and passions as earlier efforts to limit legal immigration.

Congress abolished the existing immigration quota system in 1965 with the Immigration and Nationality Act. This act doubled the number of people allowed to enter the country, set limits on immigration from the Western Hemisphere, and made it easier for families to join members who had already immigrated. More open borders meant immigration was increasingly hard to control. Reacting to the waves of undocumented immigrants who entered the country in the 1970s and 1980s, Congress passed the Immigration Reform and Control Act in 1986, granting amnesty to undocumented immigrants who had entered before 1982 and attempting to tighten controls on those who came after. Although this law included sanctions for those who hired undocumented immigrants, people continued to cross the border illegally from Mexico looking for work. The 1965 act was reformed with the Immigration Act of 1990, which, among other things, admitted even more immigrants. In the 1990s, legislation under President Bill Clinton strengthened the power of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (the precursor to the USCIS).

IMMIGRATION LAW TODAY

As we saw in this chapter’s What’s at Stake . . . ?, the immigration debate has in recent years come to be defined by the tension between two opposing political camps. On the one hand are those who seek to grapple with the issue of the estimated eleven million undocumented immigrants already in this country and the demands of American business for the cheap labor that immigrants provide; on the other hand are those who prioritize the rule of law and believe undocumented immigrants should be sent home and the borders tightened against the arrival of any more. Although under Barack Obama’s administration, deportations of undocumented workers, especially those with criminal backgrounds, rose sharply, Obama tried hard to get Congress to pass immigration reform, especially the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act. This policy would have granted relief to young adults who were brought here without documentation as children. Unwilling to leave the job unfinished, Obama decided to take executive action. In 2012, he announced the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) policy that allowed children brought in without documentation to apply for a two-year, renewable exemption from deportation during which time they would be eligible for work permits.

By contrast, opposition to undocumented immigration was a cornerstone of both Donald Trump’s campaign and presidential rhetoric. For many of his supporters, the building of a wall along the southern border was meant to be a visual sign that the United States was serious about cracking down on undocumented entrants, even though it was not clear that a wall had more than symbolic value. Still, Trump made funding the wall and stricter laws on legal as well as illegal immigration the price of his support for immigration reform. He said he wanted to limit the number of family members legal immigrants could bring in with them (so-called chain migration) and limit the number of immigrants from what he called

Support and Defend

An immigrant from Haiti, Alix Schoelcher Idrache earned his citizenship while serving in the Maryland National Guard before being accepted into the nation’s most prestigious military school. This photo, capturing his intense emotion during commencement at West Point in 2016, quickly went viral.

U.S. Army Photo by Staff Sgt. Vito T Bryant (West Point)
Chapter 2: American Citizens and Political Culture

MAP 2.1
Sanctuary and Anti-Sanctuary States

Over the objections of the federal government, some states, and many cities and counties, have passed laws limiting local authorities’ obligation to cooperate with immigration officials (Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE). In reaction, other jurisdictions have passed laws making cooperation with ICE mandatory. The legality of these strong differences among the states and localities will be decided by the courts, or perhaps by Congress if it can manage to put together a comprehensive immigration policy.


“shithole” countries, referring to Haiti and the nations of Africa. Although he initially said he would support the DREAM Act, as we noted in What’s at Stake . . . ? he tried to end DACA in 2017. In 2018 the District Court in Washington, D.C., said that the program had to resume taking applications and that ruling was upheld in November. As of this writing, DACA stays in place. In June 2020, the Supreme Court held in Trump v. NAACP that the reasoning behind the administration’s efforts to eliminate DACA were arbitrary. Under the ruling, DACA was allowed to stand, a policy the Biden administration favors.

Some state and local governments resisted the Trump administration’s efforts by creating sanctuary cities where local officials do not have to comply with the federal effort to deport undocumented workers. Approximately three hundred states, cities, and local governments have declared themselves to be sanctuaries (see Map 2.1). The Supreme Court made clear in a 2012 Arizona case that although a state was within its rights to require police officers to verify the status of people they had reason to believe were here illegally, it could not infringe on the federal right to set immigration policy. When Trump tried to defund sanctuary cities by executive order, however, several federal judges said such action was unconstitutional. These issues have yet to be untangled by the courts. As we will see in Chapter 4, federalism issues can be very complicated.
Although the reasons for declaring a locality to be a sanctuary city are generally humanitarian, there can be an awareness of economic consequences as well. One Alabama study, for instance, found that in the wake of the passage of a strict immigration bill, 40,000 to 80,000 workers had left the state, reducing demand for goods and services and costing the state between 70,000 and 140,000 jobs.\(^\text{13}\)

**PAUSE AND REVIEW** **Who, What, How**

There are competing narratives about how immigrants are assimilated into American society—one sees them blending into a melting pot, the other sees a crazy salad of diversity. Which narrative you accept has real implications for your stance on immigration issues, and those issues have high political and humanitarian stakes.

For non-Americans who are threatened or impoverished in their native countries, the stakes are sanctuary, prosperity, and an improved quality of life, which they seek to gain through acquiring asylum or by becoming legal or undocumented immigrants. People who are already American citizens have a stake here as well. At issue is the desire to be sensitive to humanitarian concerns, as well as to fill gaps in the nation’s pool of workers and skills, and to meet the needs of current citizens. These often-conflicting goals are turned into law by policymakers in Congress and the White House, and their solutions are implemented by the bureaucracy of the USCIS.

**In Your Own Words** Analyze the role of immigration and the meaning of citizenship in U.S. politics.

**THE IDEAS THAT UNITE US**  
**A common culture based on shared values**

Making a single nation out of such a diverse people is no easy feat. It is possible only because, despite all our differences, most Americans share some fundamental attitudes and beliefs about how the world works and how it should work. These ideas, our political culture, pull us together and, indeed, provide a framework in which we can also disagree politically without resorting to violence and civil war.

**Political culture** refers to the general political orientation or disposition of a nation—the shared values and beliefs about the nature of the political world that give us a common language with which to discuss and debate political ideas. **Values** are ideals or principles that most people agree are important, even if they disagree on exactly how the value—such as “equality” or “freedom”—ought to be defined.

Statements about values and beliefs are not descriptive of how the world actually is, but rather are prescriptive, or **normative**, statements about how the value-holders believe the world ought to be. Our culture consists of deep-seated, collectively held ideas about how life should be lived, and these ideas are handed down through the generations—through the process of political socialization, which we will read about in Chapter 11. Normative statements aren’t true or false but depend for their worth on the arguments that are made to back them up.

We often take our own culture (that is, our common beliefs about how the world should work) so much for granted that we aren’t even aware we are doing so. We just think we have the correct outlook and those who live elsewhere are simply mistaken about how things should be done. For that reason, it is often easier to see our own political culture by contrasting it to another’s.

Political culture is shared, although certainly some individuals find themselves at odds with it. When we say, “Americans think . . . ,” we mean that most Americans hold those views, not that there is unanimous agreement on them. To the extent that we get more polarized—that is, to the extent that our political differences get further apart and the channels through which we get information become more easily manipulated—the political culture itself may begin to break down and we may lose the common language that enables us to settle those differences through conventional political means. We have seen, especially after choosing in 2016 a president who built his brand playing just to his base, how fragile the cultural ties that bind us can be when our differences are stoked and the legitimacy of our system is challenged. It is key to remember that political cultures are neither inevitable nor eternal, and once they are lost, it can signal the loss of national identity and unity as well.

**FAITH IN RULES AND INDIVIDUALS**

In American political culture, our expectations of government have traditionally focused on rules and processes rather than on results, what we called in Chapter 1 an insistence on procedural guarantees. For example, we think government should guarantee a fair playing field but not guarantee equal outcomes for all the players. We also tend to believe that individuals are responsible for their own welfare and that what is good for them is good for society as a whole, a perspective called individualism. American culture is not wholly procedural and individualistic—indeed, differences on these matters constitute some of the major partisan divisions in American politics—but these characteristics...
Free Speech, Even When It’s Ugly

Americans don’t agree on much, but they do cherish their right to disagree. Most citizens have little tolerance for censorship and expect the government to protect even the most offensive speech. Here, a police officer flanks a marcher at a Ku Klux Klan rally in South Carolina in 2015. (Reuters/Chris Keane)

are more prominent in the United States than they are in most other nations.

To illustrate this point, we can compare American culture to the more social democratic cultures of Scandinavia, such as Sweden, Denmark, and Norway. In many ways, the United States and the countries in Scandinavia are more similar than they are different: they are all capitalist democracies, and they essentially agree that individuals ought to make most of the decisions about their own lives. Recall our comparison of political and economic systems from Chapter 1. The United States and Scandinavia, which reject substantial government control of both the social order and the economy, would all fit into the upper-right quadrant of Figure 1.3, along with other advanced industrial democracies such as Japan and Great Britain.

These countries do differ in some important ways, however. All advanced industrial democracies repudiate the wholehearted substantive guarantees of communism, but the Scandinavian countries have a greater tolerance for substantive economic policy than does the more procedural United States. We explore these differences here in more detail so that we can better understand what American culture supports and what it does not.

PROCEDURAL GUARANTEES As we have noted, when we say that American political culture is procedural, we mean that Americans generally think government should guarantee fair processes—such as a free market to distribute goods, majority rule to make decisions, and due process to determine guilt and innocence—rather than specific outcomes. The social democratic countries of Sweden, Denmark, and Norway, however, as we saw in Chapter 1, believe that government should actively seek to realize the values of equality—perhaps to guarantee a certain quality of life (shelter, jobs, and health) to all citizens or to increase equality of income. Government can then be evaluated by how well it produces those substantive outcomes, not just by how well it guarantees fair processes.

American politics does set some substantive goals for public policy, but Americans are generally more comfortable ensuring that things are done in a fair and proper way, and trusting that the outcomes will be good ones because the rules are fair. Although the American government is involved in social programs and welfare, and took a big step in a substantive direction with passage of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act in 2010, it aims more at helping individuals get on their feet so that they can participate in the market (fair procedures) than at cleaning up slums or eliminating poverty (substantive goals).

INDIVIDUALISM The individualistic nature of American political culture means that individuals are seen as responsible for their own well-being. This contrasts with a collectivist point of view, which gives government or society some responsibility for individual welfare, and holds that what is good for society may not be the same as what is in the interest of individuals. When Americans are asked by the government to make economic sacrifices, like paying taxes, such requests tend to be unpopular and more modest than in most other countries (even though Americans often give privately, generously, and voluntarily to causes in which they believe). A collective interest that supersedes individual interests is generally invoked in the United States only in times of war or national crisis. People initially responded to the COVID-19 crisis by staying home and protecting each other by wearing masks. But the mask issue was politicized by leaders appealing to our individualistic sides, and we soon left our homes in sufficient numbers to cause multiple waves of illness. This echoes the two American notions of self-interested and public-interested citizenship we discussed in Chapter 1.

For contrast, let’s look again at the Scandinavian countries, which tend to have more collectivist political cultures. In fact, one reason Scandinavians have more substantive social policies than are found in the United States is because they have a sense of themselves as a collective whole: to help one is to help all. They value solidarity, a sense of group identification and unity that allows them to entertain policies we would not consider. For example, at one time, Sweden used pension funds to help equalize the wages of workers so that more profitable and less profitable industries would be more equal, and society, according to the Swedish view, would be better off. Americans would reject this policy as violating their belief in individualism (and proceduralism, as well).

CORE AMERICAN VALUES: DEMOCRACY, FREEDOM, AND EQUALITY

We can see our American procedural and individualistic perspective when we examine the different meanings of three core American values: democracy, freedom, and equality.

DEMOCRACY Democracy in America, as we have seen, means representative democracy, based on consent and majority rule. Basically, Americans believe democracy should be a procedure to make political decisions, to choose political leaders, and to select policies for the nation. It is seen as a fundamentally just or fair way of making decisions because every
The individual who cares to participate is heard in the process, and all interests are considered. We don’t reject a democratically made decision because it is not fair; it is fair precisely because it is democratically made.

**FREEDOM** Americans also put a high premium on the value of freedom, defined as freedom for the individual from restraint by the state. This view of freedom is procedural in the sense that it provides that no unfair restrictions should be put in the way of your pursuit of what you want, but it does not guarantee you any help in achieving those things. For instance, when Americans say, “We are all free to get a job,” we mean that no discriminatory laws or other legal barriers are stopping us from applying for any particular position. A substantive view of freedom would ensure us the training to get a job so that our freedom meant a positive opportunity, not just the absence of restraint.

Americans’ commitment to procedural freedom can be seen nowhere so clearly as in the Bill of Rights, the first ten amendments to the U.S. Constitution, which guarantees our basic civil liberties, the areas where government cannot interfere with individual action. Those civil liberties include freedom of speech and expression, freedom of belief, freedom of the press, and the right to assemble, just to name a few. (See Chapter 5, “Fundamental American Liberties,” for a complete discussion of these rights.)

But Americans also believe in economic freedom, the freedom to participate in the marketplace, to acquire money and property, and to do with those resources pretty much as we please. Americans believe that government should protect our property, not take it away or regulate our use of it too heavily. Our commitment to individualism is apparent here, too. Even if society as a whole would benefit if we paid off the federal debt (the amount our government owes from spending more than it brings in), our individualistic view of economic freedom means that Americans have one of the lowest tax rates in the industrialized world (for a comparison, see *Snapshot of America: How Much Do We Pay in Taxes?*).

**EQUALITY** Another central value in American political culture is equality. Of all the values we hold dear, equality is probably the one we cast most clearly in procedural versus substantive terms. Equality in America means government should guarantee equality of treatment, of access, of opportunity, but not equality of result. People should have equal access to run the race, but we don’t expect everyone to finish in the same place or indeed to start from the same place. Thus we believe in political equality (one person, one vote) and equality before the law—that the law shouldn’t make unreasonable distinctions among people the basis for treating them differently, and that all people should have equal access to the legal system.

One problem the courts have faced is deciding what counts as a reasonable distinction. Can the law justifiably discriminate between—that is, treat differently—men and women, minorities and white Protestants, rich and poor, young and old? When the rules treat people differently, even if the goal...
is to make them more equal in the long run, many Americans get very upset. Witness the controversy surrounding affirmative action policies in this country. The point of such policies is to allow special opportunities to members of groups that have been discriminated against in the past, to remedy the long-term effects of that discrimination. For many Americans, such policies violate our commitment to procedural solutions. They wonder how treating people unequally can be fair.
that liberals who advocate a larger role for government in regulating the economy are on the left, and conservatives who think government control should be minimal are on the right.

**THE SOCIAL ORDER DIMENSION**

In the 1980s and 1990s another ideological dimension became prominent in the United States. Perhaps because, as some researchers have argued, most people are able to meet their basic economic needs and more people than ever before are identifying themselves as middle class, many Americans began to focus less on economic questions and more on issues of morality and quality of life. The new ideological dimension, which is analogous to the social order dimension we discussed in Chapter 1 (see Figure 1.2), divides people on the question of how much government control there should be over the moral and social order—whether government’s role should be limited to protecting individual rights and providing procedural guarantees of equality and due process, or whether the government should be involved in making more substantive judgments about how people should live their lives.

Even though few people in the United States want to go so far as to create a social order that makes all moral and political decisions for its subjects, some people hold that it is the government’s job to create and protect some version of a preferred social order. A conservative view of the preferred social order usually includes the following:

- An emphasis on religion in public life (prayer in school, public posting of religious documents like the Ten Commandments)
- A rejection of abortion and physician aid in dying
- Promotion of traditional family values (including a rejection of same-sex marriage and other LGBTQ rights)
- Emphasis on the “American Way” (favoring the melting pot narrative we mentioned earlier, rejecting the value of diversity for conformity and restricting immigration)
- A hierarchical sense that people should know their place in society
- Censorship of materials that promote alternative visions of the social order

Conservatives are not the only ones who seek to tell individuals how to live their lives. A newer, more liberal vision of the social order prescribes an expanded government role in regulating individual lives, though to achieve different substantive ends, including the following:

- The preservation of the environment (laws that require individuals to recycle or that tax gasoline to encourage conservation)
- The creation of a sense of community based on equality and protection of minorities (rules that urge political correctness and censorship of pornography)
- The recalibration of social and economic policy to reduce economic inequality
- The promotion of individual safety (laws promoting gun control, seat belts, and motorcycle helmets)

**THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE TWO IDEOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS**

Clearly this social order ideological dimension does not dovetail neatly with the more traditional liberal and conservative orientations toward government action. Figure 1.3 focused on a small part of the upper-right quadrant, we called advanced industrial democracy. When you look at the quadrants produced by examining those same dimensions within the United States’ procedural and individualistic political culture, you get four distinct American ideological positions that are more explanatory than simply saying “left” and “right.” Figure 2.1 lays out these positions graphically.

Economic conservatives, in the upper-right quadrant of the figure, are reluctant to allow government interference in people’s private lives or in the economy. With respect to social order issues, they are willing to let government regulate such behaviors as murder, rape, and theft, but they generally believe that social order issues such as reproductive choices, marijuana usage, LGBTQ rights, and physician aid in dying are not matters for government regulation. These economic conservatives also prefer government to limit its role in economic decision making to regulation of the market (like changing interest rates and cutting taxes to end recessions), elimination of “unfair” trade practices (like monopolies), and provision of some public goods (like highways and national defense). Economic conservatism is often summed up with the catch phrase: “get government out of the bedroom and out of the boardroom.” When it comes to immigration, economic conservatives favor more open policies since immigrants often work more cheaply and help keep the labor market competitive for business. The most extreme holders of economic conservative views are called libertarians, people who believe that only minimal government action in any sphere is acceptable. Consequently, economic conservatives also hold the government accountable for sticking to the constitutional checks and balances that limit its own power.

Economic conservatives generally don’t love government, but they do embrace procedural rules that allow individual lives the maximum amount of freedom. Practically speaking, that means they are committed to the protections in the Constitution and the democratic process that check government power. They often believe that American rights are even more extensive than the ones written down in the Bill of Rights, they endorse checks and balances as a way of limiting government power, and if they fail to win an election, they subscribe to “good-loserism”—waiting to fight again another day rather than trying to change the rules or discredit or subvert the process in order to create a more favorable political environment for themselves. Democracies require that people be good losers.
**Chapter 2: American Citizens and Political Culture**

sometimes, having confidence that a loss today does not mean a loss forever. Trust in the rules of the game and a willingness to accept the loss is essential to the compromise and cooperation valued by the founders and required by the Constitution. Since the rules of the game in the United States tend to favor the wealthy and powerful even when they lose an election, good-loserism doesn’t entail a lot of sacrifice or risk for many economic conservatives, but it still has stabilizing implications for American democracy.

**Economic Liberals** hold views that fall into the upper-left quadrant of the figure because, while they share their conservative counterparts’ maximum procedural commitment to individual freedom in determining how to live their lives, they are willing to allow government to make substantive decisions about the economy. Some economic policies they favor are job training and housing subsidies for the poor, taxation to support social programs, and affirmative action to ensure that opportunities for economic success (but not necessarily outcomes) are truly equal. As far as government regulation of individuals’ private lives goes, however, these liberals favor a hands-off stance, preferring individuals to have maximum freedom over their

**Social Liberals** expanded government role in economy and in social order

**Economic Conservatives** limited government role in economy and in social order

**Social Conservatives** limited government role in economy and expanded government role in social order

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Economic Liberals</th>
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<td>Expanded government role in economy and limited government role in social order</td>
<td>Limited government role in economy and in social order</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examples: welfare, national health care, maximum individual freedom (pro-choice, pro-LGBTQ rights, right to die), civil rights for immigrants, regulation of Wall Street</td>
<td>Examples: low taxes, laissez-faire capitalism, maximum individual freedom (pro-choice, anti-gun control), guest worker program</td>
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**Social Liberals** expanded government role in economy and in social order

Examples: welfare, social programs, censorship of pornography, strict pollution controls, affirmative action

**Social Conservatives** limited government role in economy and expanded government role in social order

Examples: low taxes, prayer in school, censorship of books that violate traditional values, anti-LGBTQ rights, tight restriction on immigration, authoritarian values on the roles people play in society

**Economic liberals** those who favor an expanded government role in the economy but a limited role in the social order
noneconomic affairs. They value diversity, expanding rights for people who have historically been left out of the power structure in the American social order—women, minorities, LGBTQ people, and immigrants. Their love for their country is tempered by the view that the government should be held to the same strict procedural standard to which individuals are held—laws must be followed, checks and balances adhered to in order to limit government power, and individual rights protected, even when the individuals are citizens of another country.

Even though economic liberals embrace government action to further their goals, they, like economic conservatives, practice good-loserism, prioritizing the Constitution and the democratic process over their policy preferences. That can result in a “two-steps-forward, one-step-back” type of incremental policy change, as the founders had hoped, rather than revolutionary change that could be a shock to the system. Accepting that sometimes they will lose means also accepting that it may take them several runs through the electoral cycle to accomplish their policy goals.

Social conservatives occupy the lower-right quadrant in our ideological scheme. These people share economic conservatives’ views on limited government involvement in the economy, but with less force and commitment and perhaps for different reasons (in fact, following the Great Depression, social conservatives, many of whom were members of the working class, were likely to be New Deal liberals). They may very well support government social programs like Social Security or Medicaid for those they consider deserving. Their primary concern is with their vision of the moral tone of life, including an emphasis on fundamentalist religious values, demonstrated, for instance, by government control of reproductive choices, opposition to LGBTQ rights, promotion of public prayer, and public display of religious icons. They endorse traditional family roles and reject change or diversity that they see as destructive to the preferred social order. Immigration is threatening because it brings into the system people who are different and threatens to dilute the majority that keeps the social order in place. Many resent what they view as condemnation by liberal elites of the way they talk about race, gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation and believe that they are labeled racist, sexist, or accused of not practicing political correctness by overly sensitive liberal “snowflakes.” In a world in which groups make claims of discrimination for historical or social reasons, they believe that they themselves are discriminated against for refusing to be politically correct and in some cases for being white and Christian. Social conservatives seek to protect people’s moral character and they embrace an authoritarian notion of community that emphasizes a hierarchical order (everyone in their proper place) rather than equality for all. Since limited government is not valued here, a large and powerful state is appreciated as being a sign of strength on the international stage. Patriotism for social conservatives is not a matter of holding the government to the highest procedural standards, as it is for those in the top half of Figure 2.1. Less worried about limiting government power over individual lives, they adopt more of a “my country right or wrong,” “America First” view that sees criticism of the United States as unpatriotic.

Because social conservatism, like social liberalism, as we shall see, falls below the mid-point on the political continuum, it places less value on the processes of democracy to achieve social ends, and more value on achieving those ends in the first place. Social conservatives, because they believe they are substantively right about the proper order of society, are less concerned with the means by which correct policy is arrived at than by the fact that it is achieved. Individual choice through the democratic process and the framework of the Constitution is less important than is following a leader who promises to fulfill their views on the social order. Especially if they feel they have truth on their side, they may feel obligated to refuse to compromise with their opponents, which is also not conducive to democracy. Another reason that social conservatives may be less committed to democratic processes over their policy goals is that they are a shrinking demographic in this country. As their numbers decline, they face the real possibility that they will lose in a majority-rule decision. As such, good-loserism may be costly for them because they are not at all sure that a loss today will be followed by a win tomorrow. Consequently, some social conservatives endorse reducing the electorate through tightening voting restrictions and redrawing districts, by eliminating immigration of people they think will not support their views, and by making rule changes to help them win in the policy arena even when they don’t have the numbers behind them to form a majority.

Social liberals, or progressives (although some economic liberals also refer to themselves as progressive), in the lower-left corner of Figure 2.1, believe not only in a stronger role for...
government to create social change but also in restructuring the system so that there is no advantage to those who have wealth. This is not the incremental change economic liberals are willing to accept as the price of doing business in the United States but a more revolutionary philosophy that says that incremental change will never be enough and that those who advocate it are part of the problem for supporting a classist, unfair system. They often see their political enemies in all three of the other ideologies we have discussed.

Social liberals want to see private health insurance eliminated and preferably the private health care system as well, replaced with a government-run system that holds costs down and prevents what they see as unacceptable profiteering. They want college tuition to be free for all Americans, regardless of income, which requires drastic reform of the higher education system. They want climate change addressed immediately.

The essential tenet of social liberals is that the system is rigged to produce unfair economic and thus political outcomes. To fix that requires radical system change—sometimes social liberals even use the language of revolution, which does not bode well for the Constitution. Like social conservatives, social liberals have concrete ideas about what they think is right, but they are aware that they face considerable democratic opposition to making those things happen. Because their numbers are small, and they are not particularly wedded to procedural norms, good-loserism is less important to them. More often they blame losses on a rigged system or unfair behavior on the part of their opponents rather than on their inability to attract majority support. But in rejecting democratic outcomes, they are closing in on authoritarian impulses that, like those of social conservatives, run counter to American political culture.

Although they can be very vocal, those in this quadrant are a relatively small slice of Americans overall. If you think about it, a country whose culture is in the upper-right quadrant (capitalist democracies defined by limited government over individual lives and the economy) is less likely to have a lot of ideological commitment to a narrative that endorses stronger government responsibility for both. The social liberal quadrant doesn’t grab a lot of adherents because it pushes the limits of Americans’ limited government, individualistic political culture.

The most extreme adherents of social liberalism are sometimes called **communitarians** for their strong commitment to a community based on radical equality of all people. Because American political culture is procedural both economically and socially, not a lot of Americans are strong adherents of an ideology that calls for a substantive government role in both dimensions. Many economic liberals, however, pick up some of the policy prescriptions of social liberals, such as environmentalism, gun control, and political correctness, but do not embrace more extreme forms of communitarianism.

**WHO FITS WHERE?**

Many people, indeed most of us, might find it difficult to identify ourselves as simply “liberal” or “conservative,” because we consider ourselves liberal on some issues, conservative on others. In fact, most Americans fall somewhere in the circle in the middle of Figure 2.1—leaning in one direction or another but not too extreme in any of our beliefs.

Others of us have more pronounced views, and the framework in Figure 2.1 allows us to see how major groups in society might line up if we distinguish between economic and social moral values. We can see, for instance, the real spatial distances that lie among (1) the religious right, who are very conservative on political and moral issues but who were once part of the coalition of southern blue-collar workers who supported Roosevelt on the New Deal; (2) traditional Republicans, who are very conservative on economic issues but often more libertarian on political and moral issues, wanting government to guarantee procedural fairness and keep the peace, but otherwise to leave them alone; and (3) moderate Republicans, who are far less conservative economically and morally. As we have seen, it can be difficult or impossible for a Republican candidate on the national stage to hold together such an unwieldy coalition.

Similarly, the gaps among Democratic Socialists and the Green Party and the Democratic Party shows why those on the left have such a hard time coming together.

**RISE OF THE TEA PARTY/FREEDOM CAUCUS ON THE RIGHT**

In the summer of 2009, with the nation in economic crisis and the new African American president struggling to pass his signature health care reform in Washington, a wave of populist anger swept the nation. The so-called Tea Party movement (named after the Boston Tea Party rebellion against taxation in 1773) crafted a narrative that was pro-American, anti-corporation, and anti-government (except for programs like Social Security and Medicare, which benefit the Tea Partiers, who tended to be older Americans). Mostly it was angry, fed by emotional appeals of conservative talk show hosts and others, whose narratives took political debate out of the range of logic and analysis and into the world of emotional drama and angry invective. A *New York Times* poll found that Americans who identified as Tea Party supporters were more likely to be Republican, white, married, male, and over forty-five, and to hold views that were more conservative than Republicans generally.

In fact, they succeeded in shaking up the Republican Party from 2010 onward, as they supported primary challenges to officeholders who did not share their anti-government ideology. Once in Congress, the new members eventually formed the Freedom Caucus, which is sympathetic to many of the Tea Party values.

As we will see, this shakeup culminated in a rejection of the party establishment in 2016. The election that year signaled a moment of reckoning for a party that had been teetering on the edge of crisis for more than a decade. As establishment candidates fell in the primaries, so too did Tea Party favorites. The split in the party left an opening for the unconventional...
candidacy of Donald Trump. Much to the dismay of party leaders like Speaker of the House Paul Ryan and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, Trump’s candidacy proved to be more about his personality and the anger of his followers than it did about the Republican Party, although in the end most party members fell in line to vote for him.

Even before the rise of the Tea Party, Republican leaders had determined that they would not cede any political victories to President Obama. In an effort that goes beyond ideology and approaches tribalism—or the pure desire to see one’s own team win at the expense of the other—Republicans simply blocked everything Obama tried to do. In 2010, then–Senate minority leader Mitch McConnell said that the highest priority the party had was to make Obama a one-term president. The members of Congress elected by the Tea Party wave in 2010 enthusiastically committed to this no-compromise stance toward policymaking, demanding the fulfillment of their wish list and refusing to negotiate with the Democrats or President Obama to get things done. That is, rather than participate in the give-and-take, compromise-oriented procedural narrative of American politics, they held out for substantive policy ends. The Freedom Caucus presented then–Speaker of the House John Boehner with serious challenges to his leadership, bringing the country to the brink of economic disaster over their refusal to raise the debt ceiling so that the United States could pay its bills in the summer of 2011. In October 2013, they even shut down the federal government for more than two weeks. Eventually their threats to unseat Boehner succeeded. In 2015, with visible relief, he turned over the Speaker’s gavel to a reluctant Rep. Paul Ryan and resigned from Congress. Weary from the same battle, Ryan decided to resign the office in 2018.

What has become clear is that many social conservatives are outside the circle that defines mainstream American beliefs, posing a challenge to Republicans who run statewide or nationally because they need to satisfy two divergent constituencies. The late Sen. John McCain discovered this in 2008 when he found himself upstaged by his charismatic vice-presidential running mate, Sarah Palin, and her strong social conservative ideas. Mitt Romney rediscovered it during the Republican primary season in 2012, when Tea Party members supported first Rick Perry, then Newt Gingrich, and then Rick Santorum in their effort to pick anybody but (the too moderate) Romney.

**TRUMP’S APPEAL TO ANTI-ESTABLISHMENT CONSERVATIVES** The escalating anger of social conservatives who felt inadequately represented by the Republican Party’s mainstream came to a peak in the anti-establishment fury displayed in 2016. During that primary season, both Donald Trump and Sen. Ted Cruz competed to address the anger that drove that group. They felt used and betrayed, especially by a party that had promised and failed to defeat Barack Obama, a president they viewed as illegitimate, in part because of Trump’s challenge to the president’s birth certificate. A mix of populist anger against the economic elite who profited at their expense, nativist anger at the perception that whites seemed to be falling behind while government was reaching out to help people of color, and partisan anger that economic conservative Republicans had been promising them socially conservative accomplishments since the days of President Richard Nixon without delivering, the rage of social conservatives seemed to be one of authoritarian populism.

Indeed, social scientists trying to understand the surprising phenomenon of the Trump vote found that one particular characteristic predicted it: a commitment to “authoritarian values.” These social scientists have found that some social conservatives, when they feel that proper order and power hierarchy is threatened, either physically or existentially, are attracted to authoritarian narratives that seek to secure the old order by excluding the perceived danger. In the words of one scholar who studies this, the response is, “In case of moral threat, lock down the borders, kick out those who are different, and punish those who are morally deviant.” Those who score higher on the authoritarianism scale hold the kind of ideas one would expect from social conservatives seeking to keep faith with a familiar and traditional order—anti-LGBTQ sentiment, anti-immigration views, even white supremacy and overt racism. Interestingly, most recently it has also corresponded to narratives that reject the idea of political correctness itself, a reaction to the sense that the expression of their fear and anger is not socially acceptable.

**THE DEMOCRATS** There have been major splits in the Democratic coalition in the past. Even though the more recent splits during the Bill Clinton and Barack Obama
administrations were disguised, they have come more fully alive after the last two presidential election seasons when a self-avowed democratic socialist challenged and lost to a more moderate liberal. The Democrats have to satisfy the party’s economic liberals, who are very procedural on most political and moral issues (barring affirmative action) but relatively substantive on economic concerns; the social liberals, substantive on both economic and social issues; and the more middle-of-the-road Democratic groups that are fairly procedural on political and moral issues but not very substantive on economic matters at all. In the late 1960s, the party almost shattered under the weight of anti–Vietnam War sentiment, and in 1972, it moved sharply left, putting it out of the American mainstream. It was President Bill Clinton, as a founder of the now-defunct Democratic Leadership Council (DLC), who in the 1990s helped move his party of liberal Democrats closer to the mainstream from a position that, as we can see in Figure 2.1, was clearly out of alignment with the position taken by most Americans. Compared to those earlier divisions, the Democrats’ current intraparty disputes are relatively minor, as the quick resolution to the 2020 Democratic Party nomination showed.

Ironically, in the 2000 election, Al Gore’s commitment to the DLC position left him vulnerable to attack from Ralph Nader, who, as a representative of the Green Party, came from the lower-left quadrant. This position does not draw huge numbers of supporters, but in an election as close as the one in 2000, it probably drew sufficient support from Gore to cost him the election. In 2004, Democratic candidate John Kerry did not have to worry as much about appealing to voters in that lower-left quadrant since many of them disliked George W. Bush so much that they were willing to vote for a candidate with whom they did not completely agree in order to try to oust Bush from office. Democrat Barack Obama had the same advantage in 2008, drawing support from across his party’s ideological spectrum in large part because of Bush’s deep unpopularity. When the Occupy movement rose on the president’s left flank in 2011, Obama was quick to adopt some of the movement’s anti–Wall Street, anti-inequality rhetoric and make it a central part of his campaign, helping to ensure that we would not face an interparty challenge from the left. Similarly, in response to the primary challenge from democratic socialist Bernie Sanders, Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden, in turn, moved to adopt more substantive economic positions. The Democrats have been able to manage the ideological dissonance in their ranks more easily than have Republicans, for whom the challenge is more fundamental. Still, President Biden will have his hands full balancing the demands of the progressive wing of the party with his own less radical preferences and those of his party’s moderates.

WHERE DO YOU FIT? One of the notable aspects of American ideology is that it often shows generational effects (see Figure 2.2). Although we have to be careful when we say that a given generation begins definitively in a certain year (there is much overlap and evolution between...
generations), it can be helpful to look for patterns in where people stand in order to understand political trends. We know, for instance, that older white Americans tend to be more ideologically conservative, and because they are reliable voters, they get a lot of media attention. But with researchers gathering public opinion data on younger voters, and with those voters promising to turn out on issues they care about, it’s a good idea to look at where millennials and post-millennials fall on the ideological spectrum in Figure 2.2.

Keep in mind that all we can do is talk about generalities here—obviously there will be many, many exceptions to the rule, and you may very well be one of them. But as a group, younger voters, especially the youngest voters, tend to be economically and socially liberal—that is, they fall in the left-hand side of Figure 2.2.

### THE CITIZENS AND AMERICAN POLITICAL BELIEFS

One of the core values of American political culture is democracy, an ideal that unites citizens—both those who are born here as well as more newly minted naturalized citizens—in the activity of self-governance. In terms of the right to vote, we have grown more democratic in the past two hundred years. Many more people can participate now—women, African Americans, and eighteen-year-olds. Although it has been subject to some authoritarian battering lately, as have other democracies around the world, our national narrative, one shared by most Americans no matter what our ideological positions, is that we are a strong and active democracy, if not the premier democracy in the world.

The prevailing narrative is that the American notion of democracy doesn’t ask much of us except that we pay attention to the news of the day and come together periodically and vote to elect our public officials. But most of us don’t even do that. The news we get, as we have seen, is highly mediated by people who are trying to influence our views. American turnout rates (the percentages of people who go to the polls and vote on election day) are abysmally low compared to those of other Western industrialized democracies, and surveys show that many Americans are apathetic toward politics. Even in 2008, a year of high turnout, only about 60 percent of eligible voters cast a vote, although, remarkably, that proportion was almost duplicated in the midterms of 2018 and was surpassed in 2020 when turnout nearly reached 67%.

How does American democracy work with such low rates of participation or interest on the part of the citizenry? One theory, based on the elite notion of democracy described in Chapter 1, claims that it doesn’t really matter whether people participate in politics because all important decisions are made by elites—leaders in business, politics, education, the military, and the media. Drawing on the pluralist theory of democracy, another explanation claims that Americans don’t need to participate individually because their views are represented in government sufficiently through their membership in various groups. For instance, a citizen may make her views heard through membership in an environmental group, a professional association or labor union, a parent-teacher organization, a veterans’ group, a church, or a political party.

By contrast, some educators and social scientists argue that falling levels of involvement, interest, and trust in politics signal a true civic crisis in American politics. They see a swing from the collectivist citizens of republican virtue to the self-interested individualistic citizens of Madisonian theory so severe that the fabric of American political life is threatened. For instance, Benjamin Barber, discussing the tendency of Americans to take their freedoms for granted and to assume that since they were born free they will naturally remain free, says that citizenship is the “price of liberty.” For all the importance of presidents and senators and justices in the American political system, it is the people, the citizens, who are entrusted with “keeping the republic.”

The question of how democratic the United States is may seem to be largely an academic one—that is, one that has little or no relevance to your personal life—but it is really a question of who has the power, who is likely to be a winner in the political process. Looked at this way, the question has quite a lot to do with your life, especially as government starts to make more demands on you, and you on it. Are you likely to be a winner or a loser? Are you going to get what you want from the political system? How much power do people like you have to get their way in government?

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**In Your Own Words** Describe the competing narratives that drive partisan divisions in American politics.
Let’s Revisit: What’s at Stake . . . ?

We began this chapter with a look at the political circus surrounding the issue of American immigration reform. After the 2012 election, the Republican leadership determined that they had to pass immigration reform in order to improve their chances with Latino voters. But what had seemed like a slam dunk for everyone had become too toxic to touch by the 2016 Republican primaries and even more so by the 2018 midterm elections. What was really at stake in American immigration policy?

Part of the problem is that, for the Republican Party, the stakes were mixed. For business leaders, a guest worker program meant affordable labor for jobs Americans were not always willing to do. They argued that undocumented workers came here because there were jobs for them and that policies that punished employers for hiring them benefited no one and damaged the economy.

For Republican Party leaders, passing reform meant getting a difficult issue off the agenda, one that portrayed the party in a divisive, unflattering light and sent a negative message to an important and growing voting bloc. They knew that Latinos were key to carrying the vote in battleground states like Colorado, Nevada, and Florida. Furthermore, they believed that the policies of economic individualism and social conservatism they advocated should be attractive to Latino voters but that, until immigration was off the table, they would not get a hearing.

But many conservatives in the party, particularly the supporters of Donald Trump, were convinced that reform meant giving a pass to law-breakers who would be rewarded for coming here illegally. If you think back to the ideological authoritarianism we discussed earlier, tough economic times and a dwindling white majority are exactly the kinds of threats to the social order that would trigger the slamming of the immigration door and the rejection of outsiders. At its worst, the rhetoric on this side of the argument, with its references to an “illegal invasion,” “third world diseases,” and “access to terrorists,” begins to sound like xenophobia and even racism, part of the reason why the party leadership want to get it behind them. It will be interesting to see if the Republican Party changes its stance with the 2020 defeat of Donald Trump.

For the Democrats, passing immigration reform meant being responsive to one of their core constituencies. For President Obama, in particular, the failure to act meant leaving undone one of his central campaign promises, the major reason he finally used executive action to address the issue. When the Democrats took back control of the White House in 2020, immigration reform was near the top of their list, but with the COVID-19 pandemic to deal with, it wasn’t clear how much else of its agenda would be successful.

Shortly after the 2012 election, Eliseo Medina, the secretary-treasurer of the Service Employees International Union and a leader of efforts to mobilize Latino voters, said, “The Latino giant is wide awake, cranky and taking names.” That has become clearer and clearer with each election since.

CLUES to Critical Thinking

“The New Colossus”
By Emma Lazarus, 1883

Anyone who has ever taken a literature course knows it is just as important to think critically about elegant prose and poetry as the stories in the daily news. At least a part of this poem is familiar to most Americans—it appears on a plaque on the Statue of Liberty, one of the first glimpses of America for millions of immigrants to the United States arriving at Ellis Island. A gift from France celebrating American freedom (the statue holds a torch and a tablet inscribed “July 4, 1776”), the Statue of Liberty itself was not intended to be a symbol of immigration. Yet it has become so, especially because of the words put in her mouth by this poem.

Given the decision to associate this poem with a national monument, we should think about it not only as a work of art but also as a political statement.

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Consider the source and the audience: The poem was written by Emma Lazarus (1849–1887), a Jewish American poet who became particularly interested in immigration after Russian anti-Semitism drove thousands of refugees to America in the late 1880s. She submitted the poem to an auction to fund the building of a pedestal for the Statue of Liberty, a gift from France to the United States, and it was later placed on a plaque inside the pedestal. How might Lazarus’s own feelings have shaped her message? Why would future immigrants seize on those words as a symbol of hope?

Lay out the argument and the underlying values and assumptions: What is Lazarus’s vision of Lady Liberty—does she see her as a symbol of national freedom from oppressive governance by England (signified by the date on the statue’s tablet) or as a symbol of freedom for individuals from repression by other countries? What does she mean by naming the statue “Mother of Exiles”? What “ancient lands” is the statue talking to when she says, “Give me your tired, your poor”? What role of the United States to those displaced from their homelands is suggested by the poem’s words?

Uncover the evidence: Lazarus does not create a political argument here but uses literary techniques to imply that the State of Liberty is a symbol of individual as well as national freedom. By calling her “Mother of Exiles” and having her utter comforting words of compassion and succor, she implies not only that the purpose of the statue is to welcome immigrants but also that such welcome is the policy of the United States. Does she offer anything other than literary skill to back up the claim that this is what the statue symbolizes?

Evaluate the conclusion: Lazarus is clearly offering a glowing “world-wide welcome” to victimized or suffering refugees to come to “the golden door” of America. From what you know about U.S. immigration history, is that an accurate representation of American immigration policy?

Sort out the political significance: Regardless of the political purpose of the French in giving the Statue of Liberty to the United States, or the intention of the American government in accepting it, it has become a near-universal symbol of an open-door immigration policy whereby the United States stands to welcome those immigrants fleeing inhospitable shores. That is due in large part to Lazarus’s words. How has this generous and humane poem created a narrative about how the United States receives immigrants, and how has that narrative shaped expectations and public policy? How does it compare to the reality of Americans’ sentiments about immigration over time?

Review

Introduction

Politics—what we want from government and how we try to get it—stems from who we are. Understanding where American citizens have come from and what they have brought with them is crucial to understanding what they choose to fight for politically and how they elect to carry out the fight.

identity politics (p. 35)
Chapter 2: American Citizens and Political Culture

**Who Is an American?**
Citizenship in the United States is both a concept promising certain rights and responsibilities, and a precise legal status. U.S. immigrants are citizens or subjects of another country who come here to live and work. To become full citizens, they must undergo naturalization by fulfilling requirements designated by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

Some people come to the United States for other reasons and do not seek permanent residency. In recent years the influx of undocumented immigrants, particularly in the southwestern states, has occupied national debate. Advocates of strict immigration policy complain that undocumented immigrants consume government services without paying taxes. Opponents of these policies support the provision of basic services for people who, like our ancestors, are escaping hardship and hoping for a better future. Congress, with the president’s approval, makes immigration law, but these rules change frequently.

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**The Ideas That Unite Us**
Americans share common values and beliefs about how the world should work that allow us to be a nation despite our diversity. The American political culture is described as both procedural and individualistic. Because we focus more on fair rules than on the outcomes of those rules, our culture has a procedural nature. In addition, our individualistic nature means that we assume that individuals know what is best for them and that individuals, not government or society, are responsible for their own well-being.

Democracy, freedom, and equality are three central American values. Generally, Americans acknowledge democracy as the most appropriate way to make public decisions. We value freedom for the individual from government restraint, and we value equality of opportunity rather than equality of result.

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**The Ideas That Divide Us**
Although the range of ideological debate is fairly narrow in America when compared to other countries, there exists an ideological division among economic liberals, social liberals, economic conservatives, and social conservatives based largely on attitudes toward government control of the economy and of the social order.

America’s growing political apathy is well documented, but the country continues to function. Still, many people claim that such apathy may indeed signal a crisis of democracy.

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