Political Beliefs

INTRODUCTION

Going grocery shopping in Spain can sometimes be a full-contact sport as senior citizens throw elbows and have no qualms pushing you out of their way as they reach for a coveted piece of cheese or juicy peach. No one in Spain thinks anything of this. In fact, Americans who continually say “excuse me” or try to keep a “personal space bubble” while passively waiting their turn at checkouts are looked at as somewhat bizarre. One can’t imagine that elbow throwing and pushing would be considered “normal” behavior at the local Whole Foods. Why is one set of behaviors acceptable in one location but seen as completely unacceptable in another? It has to do with a difference in what is deemed culturally appropriate.

As chapter 2 and chapter 3 demonstrated, the United States shares many similarities with other advanced industrial democracies, but it also has much that marks it as unique and sets it apart. These earlier chapters provided numerous societal-level measures of these similarities and differences. But, how do American beliefs about democracy stack up to those of their advanced industrial cousins? What evidence is there that all democracies share common beliefs, or is the United States different from other advanced industrial democracies in this regard? This chapter begins by looking at political cultural similarities between the United States and other advanced industrial democracies. Then, we highlight key distinctions of American political cultural beliefs relative to other democracies. Finally, the unique nature of American political culture helps to explain how American political ideological debates tend to be narrower than those of other advanced industrial democracies, which means American political debates may be fierce, but they are contained within a tighter band of ideology than the mainstream political debates of other advanced industrial democracies.

POLITICAL CULTURE

Explaining the role of political culture has always perplexed scholars of politics. Identifying what political culture is and how one nation’s culture differs from
another’s remains difficult because culture—much less political culture—is such an intricate and not very tangible concept. Anyone who has been to a cultural festival recognizes unique components of culture. People wear specialized clothing, listen and dance to characteristic music, and eat distinctive foods. A trip overseas—even to advanced industrial democracies—can produce a culture shock. It takes a while to acclimate to the culture, to act in a polite way, and frankly not to shake one’s head at what is “normal” elsewhere. For example, one of the author’s kids attending school in Spain were shocked by the more authoritative nature of Spanish teachers and pursuit of conformity and collectivity among students rather than individuality. Playground culture in Spain is much less “democratic” than culture on an American playground; teachers and adults rarely intervene in the disputes between children, leaving kids oftentimes to duke it out to get their way on the soccer field or jungle gym. Be assured, most other societies shake their heads at an American culture they admire but find curious. Spanish teachers find the US emphasis on individuality and American children’s excessive opinions exasperating and American adults as too over-involved in playgroup scuffles.

In other countries, people live their daily lives differently than they do in the United States—the way they behave, interact with others, act in the marketplace, and even how they eat food and argue about sports and life. Merely traveling from an airport and witnessing folkways of driving in some countries by swerving through lanes, locking up brakes, and endlessly honking, brings a level of culture shock until one realizes that this is the normal thing to do in
that country. This provides broad fields of study for social scientists—sociologists, anthropologists, and economists—who spend considerable time explaining how people behave differently publicly, historically, or in the marketplace. Not surprisingly, the way people interact politically differs as well, and political scientists concentrate on how shared beliefs and values of countries differ.

Most scholars blend many of the following key features into what we will use as our definition of political culture: the shared political norms, values, and beliefs of a citizenry about politics. The term political culture refers specifically to attitudes toward the political system and attitudes toward the role of citizens in the system. Since societies socialize children into a shared set of beliefs, we use political culture to link the broader social indicators emphasized in previous chapters with evidence from individual-level attitudes found in surveys and election studies.

If politics is defined as who gets what, when, and how, then countries' political cultures will differ by how their citizens believe such decisions should be made. What is the legitimate level of public debate? Does everyone have to be satisfied with policy outcomes, or does the majority simply always win? How much deference do you have to give to authority in these decisions? The political culture of a country decides the answers to these questions in decisions of who gets what, when, and how; captures citizens' satisfaction about their political system; and influences their attitudes about their own role in their political system.

Political culture is also central because a government's institutions had better produce decisions over who gets what in a way that fit citizens' beliefs. If not, those institutions fail. We see this in numerous ways. First, when countries transition to democracy from other forms of government, political leaders design institutions to fit the existing political culture. When a country's social beliefs and political institutions do not mesh, democracy peters out, fails, or gets overthrown. Matching political culture to institutions is not a one-way street nor is it just an issue for developing democracies. The political institutions of so-called consolidated democracies—democracies that are longer-lived, have survived transitions of power, and have well-developed institutions, like advanced industrial democracies—shift when the incremental revisions of political culture mean the beliefs of citizens no longer meet the institutional set-up. The United States altered its institutions historically to expand participation (former slaves, women, eighteen-year-olds) and make offices more responsive (direct election of senators, primary election for party nomination) when the gradually shifting values of society outpaced institutional ability to meet the society's expectations. For example, when Americans were no longer satisfied that people of African ancestry or women were excluded from voting, they altered their Constitution to grant voting rights to these groups.

To comprehend American political culture we must first recognize how Americans' beliefs are similar to and different from beliefs held in other advanced industrial democracies. We begin first by looking at similarities between the political beliefs in United States and other advanced industrial
democracies. These democracies share a **civic political culture** where people engage politics, believe that citizens play an important role in government, and generally trust fellow citizens. As chapter 3 demonstrated, American culture differs in part because Americans favor limited government more than citizens of other democracies. On one hand, American democratic beliefs and interpersonal social relationships will be similar to other democracies, while Americans should differ from other countries on the process of how to make decisions over who gets what, when, and how.

**CIVIC CULTURE**

Democracy relies not only on proper democratic institutions that allow for citizen participation (discussed in chapter 5), but also on citizens to possess attitudes amenable to the idea that they ought to have a voice and participate in a democracy. In their pioneering work on democracy and political culture, Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba argued that a democratic political culture—or as they say a “civic culture”—relies on citizens knowing about policies and government, feeling positive about how democracy operates, and participating in politics.¹ More than just views of the nuts-and-bolts of democratic governance, a **participatory political culture** requires that people can largely self-govern themselves outside of governmental decision making and in their own interest. The less participatory a society is, the more its people are reliant on or subjected to governmental power to drive the market, define the freedom of preference and movement, or dictate religious and social beliefs.

Three interrelated characteristics help to define a democratic or civic political culture.

1. Democracies require citizens who engage their government and demonstrate high levels of political interest.

2. People have to trust one another in social relations or the vacuum in interpersonal relations among citizens makes deciding who gets what, when, and how in self-governance next to impossible.

3. A large percentage of the people in a democracy must believe they control their own lives rather than be reliant on government or subjects of fate.

We use indicators from the World Values Survey to compare the United States to different advanced industrial democratic regions whose similar geographic or historical experiences may lead to different beliefs from the US. This ensures that simply comparing the United States to all other democracies does not paper over important distinctions among the other democracies. The democratic regions include Scandinavian countries (Finland, Norway, Sweden), northern European democracies (Great Britain, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Switzerland), southern European democracies (Italy and Spain), former countries of the British Commonwealth (Canada, Australia, New Zealand),
and the Asian democracies of Japan and Korea. There are clearly differences among countries in each of these regions, and citizens of one of these countries likely would object to being placed with what might be a neighbor with whom they have a historical rivalry. The authors beg forgiveness on this count. Nevertheless, these countries generally hold similar enough characteristics to fit together for the ease of presentation.

**POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT: POLITICAL INTEREST**

Democratic political engagement requires familiarity with the political system in order to participate in voting, party or interest group politics, writing letters to elected officials or bureaucrats, or protesting. It also requires an interest and awareness of the resulting policies that emerge from the political system. One key indicator of a civic culture is political interest—it reveals public awareness and engagement with the political system. As Figure 4.1 demonstrates, American political interest ranks highly compared with other advanced industrial democracies. About 60 percent of Americans state that they are very or somewhat interested in politics; and only 39 percent say that they are not very interested or not at all interested. This compares to about 58 percent of Scandinavians, 53 percent of Northern Europeans, 35 percent of Southern Europeans, 54 percent of Commonwealth, and 51 percent of Asian respondents saying they are very or somewhat interested in politics.

**FIGURE 4.1 Interest in Politics**

Source: Data from World Values Survey, www.worldvaluessurvey.org.
INTERPERSONAL TRUST, RECIPROCITY, AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

Vibrant citizen interest and participation in social and political life improves democracy because it builds interpersonal trust among citizens. Many scholars refer to this healthy civic culture as a society holding significant social capital. That is, citizens join civic groups, social groups, clubs, churches, or even bowling leagues and this in turn exposes them to broader groups of society than their typical sociodemographic niches. Partaking in civic life improves democracy because it builds interpersonal trust and notions of reciprocity among citizens. People invest themselves into their community, and like risk taking in market investments, payoffs to society are greater when more people are invested. Like a bull market increasingly spreads capital to different economic sectors allowing growth across the economy, so too does investment in society and the marketplace of ideas spread benefit throughout society as people get together with citizens of different social stations, learn about differing political views, and participate in self-governance.

In turn, in an unhealthy economic marketplace, if people do not trust one another with capital, no one will loan money, invest in businesses, or trust that a product is safe. The government will have to control the market on the front-end, and consequently the market becomes less dynamic. Similarly, if people do not trust one another on an interpersonal level, they will not tell their neighbors what they really think about religion or political leaders, and as a result the marketplace of ideas will shrivel up or be controlled by the government. The warning caveat emptor—buyer beware—suggests that people enter the marketplace skeptically and without much trust. It likely reduces purchases and likely leads to a suboptimal marketplace. What a pity it would be if citizens were warned caveat civis, citizen beware—prior to joining in collective decision making in society. Therefore, many common democratic cultural attitudes deal with citizens’ levels of trust with one another.

Figure 4.2 provides the results from the World Values Survey question: “Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you need to be very careful in dealing with people?” The United States ranks relatively high in terms of trust compared to other democracies but far behind the Scandinavian democracies. Even though a majority of Americans feel most people cannot be trusted (feelings seen in other democracies as well), strong pluralities think people can be trusted. The interesting case here is Scandinavian democracies where there are extremely high levels of interpersonal trust, meaning that large numbers of citizens in these countries believe that most people can be trusted (about 65%). This may stem from the incredible level of homogeneity in these societies and consociational government (discussed in chapter 5). It is also interesting that these governments have greater levels of taxation and redistribution than the other democracies as seen in chapter 3. Comparatively, in the United States about 40 percent of people believe that most people can be trusted.
POLITICAL EFFICACY: FREE CHOICE AND CONTROL OVER LIFE

Democracy also requires that a civic culture be one where citizens believe that they can participate and their voices will be heard when they do participate—what is referred to as political efficacy. Internal efficacy deals with one's confidence in having sufficient knowledge and abilities to influence the political system, i.e., the knowledge that individuals know how to and are capable of behaving democratically. External efficacy deals with how much the political system is open to influence. The World Values Survey asked whether people “feel they have completely free choice and control over their lives,” or whether people “feel that what they do has no real effect on what happens to them.” In Figure 4.3, we see how people in different countries rank on these measures. Americans feel as though they have free choice and broad control over their lives and choices (about 60%); they are not subjected to fate or denied choice and control by forces such as their government. This level is similar to Scandinavian and Commonwealth democracies (all about 60%), exceeds that of Northern Europe (about 40%) and Southern Europe (about 30%) by a noteworthy level, and strongly exceeds the feeling of free choice in the Asian democracies (about 35%).

Thus, on all measures of civic culture the United States ranks similarly with some other advanced industrial democracies. This means that out of the gates American citizens are not extraordinarily or inherently more democratic in their beliefs. Americans share common sets of civic cultural beliefs with
other advanced industrial democracies, even if these beliefs vary somewhat among regions. This does not mean that American exceptionalism, discussed in chapter 3, does not lead to many unique political beliefs.

DISTINCTION OF AMERICAN CULTURAL BELIEFS

The political culture of the United States shares broad civic cultural features with other advanced industrial democracies but has its own characteristics born out its unique formative experiences highlighted in chapter 3. American exceptionalism is not simply a historical artifact nor should it be equated with a statement of superiority. Instead, it encapsulates a set of political beliefs that Americans have been socialized into over numerous generations and can still be found in their political cultural beliefs today. Further, if politics is about who gets what, when, and how, then Americans have firm beliefs about how such decision making should occur. The process of democratic decision making in the American case—how they decide who gets what—is biased in a Lockean sense toward protecting and rewarding individual liberties. Compared to the United States, other democracies favor Rousseauian ideas about benefits for the entire society more than individual benefits in decisions over who gets what, when, and how.
As scholar Seymour Martin Lipset (1922–2006) suggests, other societies existed much longer as established political entities, and their national identity typically stems from common historical and cultural ties. Consequently, people in these countries sense that they are “born” a citizen of these countries and from this “common birth” share a mutual blood-relative-type relationship with others in their society. As Lipset notes, “you cannot become un-Swedish.” In the United States, on the other hand, there is an ethos that you become an American. Not surprisingly, the aspirational component of becoming an American is something Americans feel he or she has done, even though most Americans are natural-born citizens. Further, this identity with their nationality and the state differs. If someone asked Americans for their nationality, they may very well say Polish-American, Irish-American, Italian-American, and so on, which would be anathema to most other democratic citizenries. It’s an individual identity in the United States, whereas those who are born French, Swedish, Spanish, or Italian have a common identity much more connected to the community or nation. There is often a common language and ethnicity among other democracies. There is no surprise, then, other democratic citizens connect their political beliefs to what is best for society—or communitarian values—that outweigh individualism, since the person’s identity is easily defined by common history, culture, and blood. As a result, these countries adopted Rousseau’s notion of the “common good” being superior to individual liberties.

Other than particular historical eras or pockets of the American public, individual liberty trumps communitarianism in the United States. This focus on the individual effort leading to reward, self-reliance, and independence, or individualism, is the greatest unique feature of American political culture. Americans believe that when making decisions over who gets what, when, and how, the rules and processes need to favor individual liberty. Success in the marketplace—very often where many nongovernmental decisions over who gets what get made—is seen to come from the individual’s efforts, so Americans tend to favor that the individual be rewarded. Further, Americans believe there should be little regulation of the marketplace that curbs individual rewards and instead produces or redistributes benefits to the society as a whole—at least when compared to other advanced industrial democracies. As chapter 3 and Table 4.1 demonstrate, social regulation and regulating the marketplace of ideas is also less accepted in the United States than other democracies.

This is not to say that Americans love hate speech, long work hours, or economic inequality. In fact, the opposite is true. If so, vigilante and old western justice-themed movies would not be so popular; unlikely, reluctant, rule-breaking heroes would not continue to show up in Disney movies; and schools would not have anti-bullying policies. Americans grudgingly accept these negative aspects of society as unfavorable—but nevertheless tolerable consequences to the American way of life. In fact, Lipset suggests that higher crime, lower political participation, litigiousness (frequency of lawsuits), and poverty are the negative side of American exceptionalism—even though Americans are
## TABLE 4.1 American Individualism and Communitarian Views of Other Democracies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Value Areas</th>
<th>Illustrative Responses in Other Democracies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Americans value unfettered civil liberties, particularly freedom of speech or expression . . .</td>
<td>In contrast...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* Article 10 of the Council of Europe's European Convention on Human Rights suggested that European Member States criminalize incitement for hatred based on racism or xenophobia, insults toward public groups based on racism or xenophobia, disseminating racist/xenophobic photos. * Most member countries have laws outlawing such hate speech. * Germans may not join or establish a Communist or Nazi Party. * French Muslim women cannot wear the hijab (head veil) in public places.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Americans value the rights of the corporation to decide benefits for employees and minimal government involvement in workplace regulation . . .</td>
<td>In contrast ...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* Most other democracies require employers to give more paid vacation (sometimes as much as six weeks, with holidays) and cap the number of hours employees work per week (five-day work week in Germany/35 hours per week for many jobs in France). * On a scale of “employment protection”—or how costly it is for an employer to get rid of workers, the OECD provides a score for each country, with the United States ranking at the bottom of developed democracies:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="" /></td>
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<tr>
<td>Americans value private financing of political parties and elections . . .</td>
<td>In contrast . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* Most democracies publically finance electoral campaigns. The United States has rolled back regulations on the role of money in elections based on protections of Freedom of Expression. * Most democracies have official roles for political parties in their constitutions. The Constitution of the United States does not mention parties.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
American emphasis on individualism leads to being more comfortable with higher levels of economic inequality than in other countries.

For example...

The GINI Index (higher measure = greater inequality of family income in a country) ranking of income inequality of select countries:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>GINI Index</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Namibia</td>
<td>70.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Haiti</td>
<td>59.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>51.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Zimbabwe</td>
<td>50.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>48.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>Uruguay</td>
<td>45.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>Bulgaria</td>
<td>45.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>45.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45</td>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>44.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49</td>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>43.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50</td>
<td>Kenya</td>
<td>42.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52</td>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>42.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>66</td>
<td>Israel</td>
<td>39.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>71</td>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>38.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>73</td>
<td>Yemen</td>
<td>37.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>77</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>36.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>91</td>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>34.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>92</td>
<td>Niger</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>99</td>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>33.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>32.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>103</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>32.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>104</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>32.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>105</td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>32.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>108</td>
<td>Korea, South</td>
<td>31.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>114</td>
<td>European Union</td>
<td>30.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>124</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>27.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>132</td>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>25.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>133</td>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>24.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>136</td>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>23.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Selection of countries for illustrative purposes to show relation to the United States.

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not ready to trade out their solid faith in individualism in favor of communi-
tarianism, which may abate these negative consequences. This does not mean
that Americans would say it is a good thing that people don't participate in poli-
tics or that suing people is desirable. Nor would most Americans say that they
are in favor of poverty. The point is that they are willing to accept these negative
aspects of American-style democracy if it means protecting individualism.

Some scholars suggest that individualism is an even deeper principle to
Americans. To them, individualism is a key article of faith in an American
civil religion. That is, being an American involves a religious-like faith with
sacred texts being the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution; key
American-biblical prophets being the Founding Fathers, George Washington
and Abraham Lincoln; religious symbols being monuments and the American
flag; holy days of July 4 and Memorial Day; an exodus from British rule to our
holy land; and a view of war as a necessity mechanism—a freedom fight. Consequently, individualism becomes almost a holy virtue that one can imagine is
inscribed on national commandments.

Americans, despite their non-communitarian views, are ironically not
anti-community. In fact, Americans embrace public virtue. Americans’ indi-
vidualist side loves the lone hero in High Noon, but Americans also “remember
the Alamo.” Both demonstrate sacrifice to American justice, but one with a lone
hero and the other an admired camaraderie of a selfless group willingly and
knowingly facing a brutal fate together. Historian Gordon Wood and politi-
cal scientist Daniel Elazar (1934–1999) describe the contending components
of American political culture as including a strong streak of individualism,
but also a belief in the commonwealth. That is, Americans hold contending
cultural beliefs where self-interest and undivided interest of the whole people
can co-exist. Americans can embrace the New England Town Meeting model
of making collective decisions for the good of society so admired by de Toc-
queville. The frontier demanded individual grit, but also required neighbors
helping each other thrive or even survive (read Laura Ingalls Wilder), building
co-operative stores, grain elevators, and community schoolhouses. As Elazar
emphasizes, individualism is “tempered” by commitments to community, but
it is preferred that nongovernmental avenues are pursued. Some areas of the
United States feel less connected to the ideal of community and mistrust gov-
ernment more. Contemporary author and commentator E. J. Dionne has high-
lighted how Americans have perhaps forgotten the ideal of community from
their founding and history relative to contemporary over-concentration on
individualism. As Dionne points out, it is perfectly American to be both indi-
vidualistic and act with civic virtue in community. Chapter 3 provided a chart
of governmental spending on social services that rated the United States rather
low relative to other democracies. In Figure 4.4, the amount of American social
spending is very average when one adds in the private sector social spending,
that is, charity. In fact, the United States ranks higher than the OECD (devel-
oped countries) average, and similarly to social democracies like Germany.
Other democracies believe in the private sector and have social divisions and inequalities. Their citizens have faith in the free market, pursue individual life goals, and produce incredibly rich capitalist societies. However, because of the common national background that these societies share, there is far less distinction between the community and the state. Further, because the democratic revolutions of these countries very much redefined these governing systems into democracy to provide for social equality, the government is seen as an adequate and preferable mechanism to bring about equality. The government provides commonly accepted social order, so citizens broadly accept that the state should actively participate in the market and redistribute wealth because the social welfare state protects the social order.9

Americans believe in equality as well. However, as Lipset makes evident, Americans believe in equality of opportunity not equality of outcome, also referred to as equality of result. That is, Americans believe that each individual should have an equal chance for achievement or to determine her own destiny and any difference in outcomes or achievements is a result of individual ability. As Table 4.1 illustrates above, Americans often accept inequality of outcome, whereas other democracies place far greater governing value on equality of outcome. In deciding who gets what, when, and how, these democracies prefer that decisions are made in ways that produce equal outcomes—particularly economic

Source: Data from OECD, Social Expenditure Database (SOCX), www.oecd.org/social/expenditure.htm.
outcomes—for the social order. Despite particular moments of protest and reform, Americans have historically been more willing to accept inequalities as long as it seems as if the opportunity for individual achievement has been equal. As political scientists Christine Barbour and Gerald Wright argue, the United States believes in procedural guarantees rather than substantive guarantees. That is, in American political decision making, the process of deciding who gets what, when, and how must be fair, even if the outcomes are not fair. In other democracies, citizens want the outcomes of those decisions to be fair as well. Consequently, even when American social service spending occurs, it is process oriented: aimed at trying to make the process fairer rather than focusing on policies that focus on making outcomes fairer. For example, affirmative action attempts to equalize access to educational opportunities for groups formerly discriminated against, but it does not ensure good grades, educational success, or a degree. Public education has a long history dating back to Founding Father advocates such as Jefferson calling for large government investment designed to provide equal opportunity to the masses, rather than tracking for an elite, and is supported by majorities of Americans. Higher education benefits typically involve access to preferable loans rather than outright tuition payments. Unemployment benefits typically require active pursuit of employment and/or retraining of skills.

Scholars have established the broad strokes of differences between American political beliefs and other democracies’ beliefs, but how do the attitudes of Americans toward individualism and equality fit with other advanced industrial democracies? In other words, how much control should the individual have over her personal fortunes versus how much control should the government have to ensure that outcomes are fair? All democracies should show tendencies toward the individual having control, but Americans favor individual control of outcomes more than other democracies.

**INDIVIDUALISM AND ECONOMY**

The most common place to see individualism vs. communitarianism play out is in the marketplace. This is because so much of decision making over who gets what, when, and how comes through in markets, and governments involve themselves in efforts to equalize market effects in response to citizen demands. Rather than simply looking at public policies toward the market and redistribution, individualism should become evident through citizens’ behavior and attitudes. Individualism is not easy to measure in political or market behaviors because it is not an easy concept to boil down, and it is affected by the incentives that national laws provide. Some marketplace behaviors may demonstrate heavier individual risk taking. For instance, Europeans tend to invest less frequently in the more risky stock market than Americans compared to other more conservative investment vehicles.

Further, most other advanced industrial democracies have far greater percentages of their workforce in labor unions. Even countries seen to be rather similar to the United States in economic matters such as the United Kingdom
and Canada have over a quarter of their workforce belonging to labor unions compared to only around 11 percent of the American workforce being in unions. What's more, social democracies like Belgium, Finland, Norway, Sweden have 50 percent, 69 percent, 54 percent, and 68 percent of their workforce, respectively, in labor unions. Further, these governments provide a very direct role in corporate and public policy in these countries. In the United States, the percentage of union workers continues to fall without great public outcry, which demonstrates a greater comfort among Americans for individualism within the marketplace rather than binding one's career, labor bargaining, as well as pay and benefits together with others.

More than behaviors and market statistics, the attitudes of Americans demonstrate greater individualism compared to other democracies' greater communalism. In particular, is there a greater acceptance of inequality of outcomes in the marketplace in the United States compared to other democracies? Second, should unequal market outcomes be tied to merit and individual achievement? Or should government policies ensure equal outcomes no matter the merit? We use measures from the 2005–2006 World Values Survey to measure attitudes across these democracies.

Figure 4.5 provides the first glimpse of Americans' acceptance of inequality. In the interest of presentation, we collapse a scale from 1 (incomes should be made more equal) to 10 (we need larger income differences as incentives for

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FIGURE 4.5</th>
<th>Income Should Be More Equal/Need Large Differences in Income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>Scandinavia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Data from World Values Survey, www.worldvaluessurvey.org.
individual effort) into four categories ranging from incomes most equal (value of 1 or 2), incomes equal (value of 3, 4, or 5), need difference of income (6, 7, or 8), and more difference of income (9 or 10). Free markets include the principle of labor being a market and valued differently, so it is not surprising that most democracies’ citizens believe that differences in income are necessary. We see this in the fact that in all cases, “more difference” is stronger than “more equal” in the United States, Southern Europe, the Commonwealth, and Japan/Korea. It is noteworthy that northern Europeans and Scandinavians are as likely to say that incomes should be made more equal as they are to say that differences in income provide individual incentive. Americans are the least likely to say that incomes should be made more equal, and are more likely than anyone but the Korean/Japanese cases to say that large differences in income provide an incentive for individual effort.

Americans also believe that “competition is good”—that “it stimulates people to work hard and develop new ideas” rather than believing that “competition is harmful”—“it brings out the worst in people,” as displayed in Figure 4.6. The difference here is typically not as sharp, at least when compared to the Scandinavian and Commonwealth country cases. It is quite noteworthy compared to Japan and Korea, who ironically were more likely to prefer differences in income to motivate people, shown in Figure 4.5. In short, we see in Figure 4.6 that Americans are the most likely to believe that competition is good. That said, all democracies share a belief in the positive benefits of competition.

![Figure 4.6 Competition Is Good/Harmful](image)

Source: Data from World Values Survey, www.worldvaluessurvey.org,
Americans also tend to believe that hard work brings success compared to others, as seen in Figure 4.7. The question specifically ranges from 1 (in the long run, hard work usually brings a better life) to 10 (hard work doesn't generally bring success—it's more a matter of luck and connections). We create categories from this scale of: Hard Work Brings Success (1 or 2), Success Sometimes (3, 4, or 5), Doesn't Bring Success (6, 7, or 8), and Not Generally (9 or 10). Again, the distinctions are sharpest when one considers that Americans are both the most common to say that hard work brings success—a very individualistic concept—and the least likely to say hard work does not generally pay off compared to connections or luck. In other words, even if the different view of the benefits of hard work between Americans and Commonwealth and Scandinavian democratic citizens is not as sharp, Americans are not neutral on this—they hold the most polarized views.

Taken together, Figures 4.5, 4.6, and 4.7 paint the United States as particularly open to competition and individual rewards. One can say that citizens in other countries share Americans’ views on these indicators of individualism, but Americans are always among the most individualistic across all of the measures. Other democratic citizens were high on some of these and low on others.
Instead of the more abstract measures on competition, hard work, and pay inequality generally, a more real-life example of how attitudes toward individualism affect what is seen as fair in decisions over who gets what, when, and how may better draw distinctions between Americans and other democracies’ citizens. Lipset pointed out one particularly useful question in his discussion of American exceptionalism. The World Values Survey has asked the following question: “Imagine two secretaries, of the same age, doing practically the same job. One finds out that the other earns considerably more than she does. The better paid secretary, however, is quicker, more efficient and more reliable at her job. In your opinion, is it fair or not fair that one secretary is paid more than the other?”

It may seem obvious in a free market system that merit would be rewarded. This is the case in all of these democracies. It is noteworthy, however, citizens in other democracies say such merit is unfair two or three times as frequently as do Americans (See Table 4.2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Fair</th>
<th>Not Fair</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scandinavian Democracies</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern European Democracies</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern European Democracies</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commonwealth Democracies</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan &amp; Korea</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Americans believe in equality, but in decisions over who gets what, when, and how, equality of outcome is not as important for Americans as it is elsewhere. On balance, individualism trumps communitarianism for Americans, whereas other democracies have citizens more likely to prefer communal benefits. These attitudes are not merely historical artifacts but play important parts in current democratic expectations and preferences toward decision making. This distinctive political culture spills over into American political ideology, which as a result of these cultural beliefs includes a narrower set of political ideological viewpoints relative to other democracies.
IDEOLOGY

Like political culture, scholars struggle to clearly explain how political ideology works as well as to provide a definition for the term. The difficulty comes from its broad usage to describe different elements of political thought. Some scholars have used ideology to discuss how ideologues use political ideas as illusions or mysticism to persuade followers to bring about political change or to cling to the status quo, or way things are now. Most political scientists view ideology as a more “value-neutral” concept that describes a shared set of beliefs among a population or group. As public opinion experts Robert Erikson and Kent Tedin define it, ideology is a shared “set of beliefs about the proper order of society and how it can be achieved.” The simplicity of this definition allows for ideology to reflect a shared belief system among citizens as well as the fact that there can be more than one set of beliefs within a democracy. In fact, ideological beliefs tend to be those ideas that divide groups of citizens in democracies, compared to political culture, which are those ideas that societies broadly hold in common.

In democracies, the main divide among groups of citizens has historically been viewed as those who are on the left of the political spectrum who favor more government involvement in the economy, and those on the right of the political spectrum who favor less government involvement in the economy. This is due to the fact that the industrial age brought both more democracy to many societies as well as pressure to have governments reign in the dynamic, and at times negative, components of industrial life: changing infrastructure, shifting of wealth from the countryside to the city, worker safety, childhood labor laws, wage and housing regulations, social welfare, monopolies, and trade. These terms have stuck, even though new divisions have grown beyond the proper role of the government in the marketplace.

The differential political experience in the United States and other democracies, as outlined in chapter 3, has led to different types of political debate. Democracies have different types of political divisions based on their histories, but the reasons provided for American exceptionalism are also those that explain why the American ideological debate is narrower than the ideological debates in other advanced industrial democracies. Two broad characteristics about American political beliefs explain why this is the case.

First, Americans share a value-based commitment to liberalism. Again this is not “liberal” in the context of contemporary left-leaning political ideas in America, but the broader notions of liberalism that Americans share from Locke’s view of legitimate government as being limited. Americans remain so loyal to this vision of liberalism and it is so commonly held that Americans do not recognize it; it is the “natural order of things.” American exceptionalism scholars actually point to this as a potential weakness in the American system. Lipset says this means that Americans—rather than having consensus on contemporary political debates—end up arguing more and sharply about
the application of liberal principles that most Americans agree upon. Louis Hartz claims that Americans’ attachment to Lockean liberalism is absolute and uncritical, and the unanimity of this can be compulsive “Americanism” that leaves the society open to overreaction to other ideological thoughts in the world. For example, in the 1950s, Americans went through the Red Scare, fear of the rise of Communism, which turned into McCarthyism, a witch hunt of sorts led by Senator Joseph McCarthy where suspected communists were spied upon, blacklisted, and even hauled before Congress, as a result of the American fear of the loss of liberalism associated with Soviet Communist threat. In more modern times, after September 11th, many Americans, failing to distinguish between those terrorists who carried out the attacks and the larger Muslim community, reported fear of Muslims in general and a vitriolic dislike of Islam. Hate crimes targeted at Muslim Americans increased 1700 percent in the year after the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States. De Tocqueville, who greatly admired the American citizenry, also noted that he knew of “no country where there is generally less independence of thought and real freedom of debate than in America.” Whether positive or negative, the American experience of being “locked into Locke” means that American definitions of left and right do not extend very far.

Second, as American exceptionalism scholars have highlighted, Americans’ lack of feudalism and socialist movement left the United States without the demand for large-scale government involvement in the economy. This closely relates to the first point, that the United States does not have a significant mainstream left like other democracies. Further, the United States also does not have mainstream far-right nationalism or fascism either. While only some democracies have citizens with a nationalist/fascist belief system, its reliance on the primacy of the state as an actor for the people goes well beyond the limited government ideals of Americans. This leaves a narrow band of liberal political beliefs in the United States.

Other democracies have a much broader ideological spectrum. First, the socialist movements that dominated European societies and helped democratize many of these countries means there are many citizens in these democracies who hold political beliefs far to the left of Americans. Communist parties did exist in many of these democracies, but they largely lost steam as the countries succeeded in the free market and the Cold War divisions with communist Soviet-bloc became acute. Most commonly, the socialist movement led most mainstream leftists to identify with Socialist—or often Social Democratic or Labor—parties.

Also slightly to the left of Americans were the mainstream center-right parties such as the Conservative or Christian Democratic parties. Even though these parties serve as the mainstream right of many of these democracies, there is a greater acceptance of social welfare and redistribution on the part of the government among mainstream right parties in other democracies. First, the common brotherhood of these nations meant that for the
good of the social order one would not leave their poorer brothers or sisters behind, especially in the cases where parties were built around religious denominations. Second, these parties tended to be made up of the higher classes, who had a sense of **noblesse oblige**—or a sense of responsibility that comes with wealth and privilege—so there was always a greater willingness to use government to provide for less fortunate and lower classes. This sense is not just historical. When visiting the United States shortly following the controversial and vociferous debates about American health care reform inside and outside Congress in 2010, the very conservative—for France—French President Nicolas Sarkozy spoke at Columbia University about the passage of the legislation by saying: “Welcome to the club of states who don’t turn their back on the sick and the poor. . . . The very fact that there should have been such a violent debate simply on the fact that the poorest of Americans should not be left out in the streets without a cent to look after them . . . is something astonishing to us.”

There is American-style liberal thought in other advanced industrial democracies, but the parties that represent these views tend to be important but minor parties. It is certainly mainstream in those democracies, but it is the only mainstream in American political life. In the United States, both parties are liberal parties. Figure 4.8 lays out a theoretical ideological placement of American ideological positions as represented by American parties and the ideological placement of most European parties from left to right. There is not

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**FIGURE 4.8 Ideological Belief Systems in Advanced Industrial Democracies**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Far Left</th>
<th>Center-Left</th>
<th>Center-Right</th>
<th>Liberal</th>
<th>Extreme Right</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ideological Space in other Advanced Industrial Democracies</td>
<td>Communist</td>
<td>Social Democratic Socialist Labor</td>
<td>Christian Democratic Conservative</td>
<td>Liberal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideological Space in United States</td>
<td>Democrats</td>
<td>Republicans</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: We “wall off” the extreme right to keep it from appearing as if the mainstream American parties even approach this belief system. The Nationalist-Fascist ideologies in these democracies are distinct from the typical left-right debate and tend not to be in the mainstream of those democracies.

Source: Data from World Values Survey, www.worldvaluessurvey.org.
specific quantifiable comparison here, particularly because what Americans think they mean by left and right is different from what other democracies' citizens think is meant by left and right. So this figure is—at best—a very simplified attempt by the authors to spatially demonstrate the ideological positions of these democracies.

There has been a growing ideological division between the two American parties, but the misplaced accusations of some Americans—including political leaders and news commentators—against their political opponents as “socialists” or “fascists” lack any accuracy. A European social democrat would laugh off the suggestion that an American Democratic Party member was socialist, and a European nationalist/fascist would reject an American Republican Party member as a sell-out to their nation.

Scholars of American political ideology have suggested that Americans are pragmatic and not very ideological, even if Americans fight like cats and dogs over public policy. Political scientist Philip Converse (b. 1928–) found that Americans’ views on issues shifted frequently because American political beliefs were not constrained due to the fact that Americans were “innocent of ideology” and that their only belief systems were “folk ideologies” at best. This means that Americans shift their positions on issues because they are not very well differentiated from each other or anchored in a firm differentiated ideology—at least there lacks an ideology beyond the common belief system of liberalism. Thus, Americans commonly believe that government should be limited in the marketplace and individuals’ lives. Even when the government does provide social services, much of these are provided by the private sector that receives grants from the government rather than a government entity providing the benefit directly (see Figure 4.4 above). Americans prefer that a lot is left to the private sector. Americans reading this book may be students at a public university. While that institution is largely funded by a state (and comparatively large tuition costs relative to other democracies), the university is accredited by a private not-for-profit accreditation body so state governments do not have authority to say whether or not the degrees their universities provide are certified. Further, these public institutions often—and increasingly—rely on private donations to keep their doors open.

Thus, Americans tend to be to the ideological right of other democracies’ citizenries. They prefer less government control over who gets what, when, and how. In decisions over who gets what, when, and how, the government typically has a moderate footprint in free economies. Yet ownership of business was something pushed for by the socialist movement and the successor center-left parties in Europe, often referred to as social-democratic or labor parties. So a greater history of government-owned businesses has existed in other democracies with less resistance to it than one would find in the United States.

The World Values Survey asked people to rank from 1 (private ownership of business and industry should be increased) to 10 (government ownership of
Political Beliefs

Source: Data from World Values Survey, www.worldvaluessurvey.org.

FIGURE 4.9 Public vs. Private Ownership of Business

[Bar chart showing public vs. private ownership across different regions.]

business and industry should be increased). We have collapsed these into four categories for ease of presentation, with full private ownership (answer of 1 or 2), some private (answer or 3, 4, or 5), some public (answer or 6, 7, or 8) and more public (answer of 9 or 10). As Figure 4.9 illustrates, Americans are far more likely than other countries’ citizens to say that businesses should be privately rather than publically owned. Only a tiny fraction of Americans believe in public ownership of business. While other countries prefer private ownership as well, the divide between private and public ownership is not nearly as stark as it is in the United States.

Though not as dramatic as public vs. private ownership, when people were asked on the same 10-point scale whether 10 “the government should take more responsibility to ensure that everyone is provided for” versus 1 “people should take more responsibility to provide for themselves,” Americans again emerge as more likely to prefer that people take more individual responsibility compared to all other democratic regions except Commonwealth countries (see Figure 4.10). These categories are broken into four groups for ease of presentation with “government takes more” responsibility (values of 10, 9, or 8) “government” (values of 7 or 6), “people” (values of 5 or 4), and “people take more” responsibility (values of 3, 2, or 1). The difference may appear marginal, but it is important to remember that the American government is far less involved in the marketplace as highlighted in chapter 3 and in Table 4.1 above. So in context, the greater likelihood that Americans prefer private ownership even given that they already have it, makes this finding stronger.
CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

When examining political culture and ideology, the United States is in some ways very similar to its cousins in other advanced industrial democracies; yet on key indicators, the United States is quite exceptional, or different. When examining political culture, or shared norms and beliefs, scholars emphasize how important it is for a democracy to have a civic culture, or an engaged and trusting citizenry who knows how to and believes in their ability to influence politics. On measures such as interest in politics and trust of fellow citizens, the United States is on par with other democracies; while it doesn’t always have the highest levels of trust, and displays more interest than many other democracies, it is certainly not outside the norm. In terms of political efficacy, the United States also ranks similarly to other democracies.

This chapter also highlighted the aspirational aspects of “being American.” American focus, some would say even religious-like adherence, on individualism has led American political culture to deviate from other democracies in important ways. For example, Americans prefer private solutions to social problems rather than government, or public solutions more than other democratic citizenries. American individualism also causes its citizens to be more in favor of competition and less likely to support income redistribution than citizens in other democracies.

Source: Data from World Values Survey, www.worldvaluessurvey.org.
Finally, American ideology is different than other countries’ ideological beliefs. The United States has a much more truncated ideological spectrum compared to other democracies. American Democrats and Republicans are both liberal parties and occupy a much smaller ideological space than parties in other countries. This stems in part because of the very different historical experiences that shaped political debate and ideology in the United States compared to other democracies. Thus, Americans are ideologically further to the right than publics in other democracies, causing Americans to favor economic policies such as private ownership of business and place greater value on personal responsibility.

**POINTS TO REMEMBER**

- Political culture is the shared political norms, values, and beliefs of a citizenry about politics. The term political culture refers specifically to attitudes toward the political system and attitudes toward the role of citizens in the system.
- A participatory political culture requires that people can largely self-govern themselves outside of governmental decision making and in their own interest and implies that citizens understand how to influence government and the outputs of democratic government.
- Three interrelated characteristics help to define a democratic or civic political culture. First, democracies require citizens who engage their government and demonstrate high levels of political interest. Second, people have to trust one another in social relations or the vacuum in interpersonal relations among citizens makes deciding who gets what, when, and how in self-governance next to impossible. Third, a large percentage of the people in a democracy must believe they control their own lives rather than be reliant on government or subjects of fate.
- Americans report high levels of interest in politics, similar to other advanced industrial democracies.
- In terms of trust and free choice, Americans rank similarly to citizens of other advanced democracies.
- Americans place greater emphasis on individualism while other democracies place greater emphasis on communitarianism. This is illustrated by the fact that social spending is similar across democracies, but where the United States has more private (or charitable) spending, an individual endeavor, other countries have much higher levels of public, or governmental, social spending.
- American emphasis on individualism also causes American citizens to place more emphasis on individual responsibility and private ownership of industry than citizens in other democracies.
CHAPTER 4

KEY TERMS

Civic culture (p. 48) | Individualism (p. 53)
Civic political culture (p. 48) | Internal efficacy (p. 51)
Civil religion (p. 56) | Noblesse oblige (p. 65)
Communitarian values (p. 53) | Participatory political culture (p. 48)
Consolidated democracies (p. 47) | Political culture (p. 47)
Equality of opportunity (p. 57) | Equality of outcome (p. 57)
Equality of outcome (p. 57) | Internal efficacy (p. 51)
External efficacy (p. 51) | Social capital (p. 50)
Ideology (p. 63) |

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is political culture? What is civic culture?
2. What is social capital, and how is it related to interpersonal trust? How is this similar in the United States and other democracies?
3. In what ways is American political culture similar to the political culture in other advanced industrial democracies? Different?
4. How is American individualism manifested in attitudes toward fellow citizens, government, and personal and government responsibility? How is this similar or different than what is seen in other countries?
5. Describe the ideological orientation of Americans. How does the ideological space occupied in the United States differ from the space occupied in other democracies?

SUGGESTED READINGS

NOTES


22 Lipset, American Exceptionalism, 21.


24 Lipset, American Exceptionalism, 32.