4-3 The Sources of Political Culture

That Americans bring a distinctive way of thinking to their political life is easier to demonstrate than to explain. But even a brief, and necessarily superficial, effort to understand the sources of our political culture can help make its significance clearer.

The American Revolution, as we discussed in Chapter 2, was essentially a war fought over liberty: an assertion by the colonists of what they took to be their rights. Though the Constitution, produced 11 years after the Revolution, had to deal with other issues as well, its animating spirit reflected the effort to reconcile personal liberty with the needs of social control. These founding experiences, and the political disputes that followed, have given to American political thought and culture a preoccupation with the assertion and maintenance of rights. This tradition has imbued the daily conduct of U.S. politics with a kind of adversarial spirit quite foreign to the political life of countries that did not undergo a libertarian revolution or that were formed out of an interest in other goals, such as social equality, national independence, or ethnic supremacy.

The adversarial spirit of the American political culture reflects not only our preoccupation with rights, but also our long-standing distrust of authority and of people wielding power. The colonies' experiences with British rule were one source of that distrust. But another, older source was the religious belief of many Americans, which saw human nature as fundamentally depraved. To the colonists, all of mankind suffered from original sin, symbolized by Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. Since no one was born innocent, no one could be trusted with power. Thus, the Constitution had to be designed in such a way as to curb the darker side of human nature. Otherwise, everyone's rights would be in jeopardy.

The contentiousness of a people animated by a suspicion of government and devoted to individualism could easily have made democratic politics so tumultuous as to be impossible. After all, one must be willing to trust others with power if there is to be any kind of democratic government, and sometimes those others will be people not of one's own choosing. The first great test case took place around 1800 in a battle between the Federalists, led by John Adams and Alexander Hamilton, and the Democratic Republicans, led by Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. The two factions deeply distrusted each other: the Federalists had passed laws designed to suppress Jeffersonian journalists; Jefferson suspected the Federalists were out to subvert the Constitution; and the Federalists believed Jefferson intended to sell out the country to France. But as we shall see in Chapter 9, the threat of civil war never materialized, and the Jeffersonians came to power peacefully. Within a few years, the role of an opposition party became legitimate, and people abandoned the idea of making serious efforts to suppress their opponents. By happy circumstance, people came to accept that liberty and orderly political change could coexist.

The Constitution, by creating a federal system and dividing political authority among competing institutions, provided ample opportunity for widespread—though hardly universal—participation in politics. The election of Jefferson in 1800 produced no political catastrophe, and those who had predicted one were, to a degree, discredited. But other, more fundamental features of American life contributed to the same end. One of the most important of these was religious diversity.

The absence of an established or official religion for the nation as a whole, reinforced by a constitutional prohibition of such an establishment and by the migration to this country of people with different religious backgrounds, meant that religious diversity was inevitable. Since there could be no orthodox or official religion, it became difficult for a corresponding political orthodoxy to emerge. Moreover, the conflict between the Puritan tradition, with its emphasis on faith and hard work, and the Catholic Church, with its devotion to the sacraments and priestly authority, provided a recurrent source of cleavage in American public life. The differences in values between these two groups showed up not only in their religious practices but also in areas involving the regulation of manners and morals, and even in people's choice of political party. For more than a century, candidates for state and national office were deeply divided over whether the sale of liquor should be prohibited, a question that arose ultimately out of competing religious doctrines.

Even though there was no established church, there was certainly a dominant religious tradition—Protestantism, and especially Puritanism. The Protestant churches provided people with both a set of beliefs and an organizational experience that had profound effects on American political culture. Those beliefs encouraged, or even required, a life of personal achievement as well as religious conviction: a believer had an obligation to work, save money, obey the secular law, and do good works. Max Weber explained the rise of capitalism in part by what he called the *Protestant ethic*—what we now sometimes call the *work ethic*.[30] Such values had political consequences, as people holding them were motivated to engage in civic and communal action.

Churches offered ready opportunities for developing and practicing civic and political skills. Since most Protestant churches were organized along congregational lines—that is, the church was controlled by its members, who put up the building, hired the preacher,

and supervised the finances—they were, in effect, miniature political systems with leaders and committees, conflict and consensus. Developing a participatory political culture was undoubtedly made easier by the existence of a participatory religious culture. Even some Catholic churches in early America were under a degree of lay control. Parishioners owned the church property, negotiated with priests, and conducted church business.

All aspects of culture, including the political, are preserved and transmitted to new generations primarily by the family. Though some believe that the weakening of the family unit has eroded the extent to which it transmits anything, particularly culture, and has enlarged the power of other sources of values—the mass media and the world of friends, fashion, leisure, and entertainment—there is still little doubt that the ways in which we think about the world are largely acquired within the family. In Chapter 7, we shall see that the family is the primary source of one kind of political attitude: identification with one or another political party. Even more important, the family shapes in subtle ways how we think and act on political matters. Psychologist Erik Erikson noted certain traits that are more characteristic of American than of European families—the greater freedom enjoyed by children, for example, and the larger measure of equality among family members. These familial characteristics promote a belief, carried through life, that every person has rights deserving protection and that a variety of interests have a legitimate claim to consideration when decisions are made.[31]

The combined effect of religious and ethnic diversity, an individualistic philosophy, fragmented political authority, and the relatively egalitarian American family can be seen in the absence of a high degree of class-consciousness among Americans. **Class-consciousness** means thinking of oneself as a worker whose interests are in opposition to those of management, or vice versa. In this country, most people, whatever their jobs, think of themselves as "middle class."

Though the writings of Horatio Alger are no longer popular, Americans still seem to believe in the message of those stories—that the opportunity for success is available to people who work hard. This may help explain why the United States is the only large industrial democracy without a significant socialist party and why the nation has been slow to adopt certain welfare programs.

4-4 The Culture War

Almost all Americans share some elements of a common political culture. Why, then, is there so much cultural conflict in American politics? For many years, the most explosive political issues have included abortion, gay rights, drug use, school prayer, and pornography. Viewed from a Marxist perspective, politics in the United States is utterly baffling: instead of two economic classes engaged in a bitter struggle over wealth, we have two cultural classes locked in a war over values.

class-consciousness A belief that one is a member of an economic group whose interests are opposed to people in other such groups.

orthodox A belief that morality and religion ought to be of decisive importance.

progressive A belief that personal freedom and solving social problems are more important than religion.

As first formulated by sociologist James Davison Hunter, the idea is that there are, broadly defined, two cultural classes in the United States: the orthodox and the progressive. On the **orthodox** side are people who believe that morality is as important as, or more important than, self-expression and that moral rules derive from the commands of God or the laws of nature—commands and laws that are relatively clear, unchanging, and independent of individual preferences. On the **progressive** side are people who think that personal freedom is as important as, or more important than, certain traditional moral rules and that those rules must be evaluated in light of the circumstances of modern life—circumstances that are quite complex, changeable, and dependent on individual preferences.[32]

Most conspicuous among the orthodox are fundamentalist Protestants and evangelical Christians, and so critics who dislike orthodox views often dismiss them as the fanatical expressions of "the Religious Right." But many people who hold orthodox views are not fanatical or deeply religious or right-wing on most issues: they simply have strong views about drugs, pornography, and sexual morality. Similarly, the progressive side often includes members of liberal Protestant denominations (e.g., Episcopalians and Unitarians) and people with no strong religious beliefs, and so their critics often denounce them as immoral, anti-Christian radicals who have embraced the ideology of secular humanism, the belief that moral standards do not require religious justification. But few progressives are immoral or anti-Christian, and most do not regard secular humanism as their defining ideology.

Groups supporting and opposing the right to abortion have had many angry confrontations in recent years. The latter have been arrested while attempting to block access to abortion clinics; some clinics have been firebombed and at least seven physicians have been killed. A controversy over what schoolchildren should be taught about sexual orientation was responsible, in part, for the firing of the head of the New York City school system; in other states, there have been fierce arguments in state legislatures and before the courts over whether gay and

lesbian couples should be allowed to marry or adopt children. Although most Americans want to keep heroin, cocaine, and other drugs illegal, a significant number of people want to legalize (or at least decriminalize) use of certain substances (such as marijuana). The Supreme Court has ruled that there cannot be state-sponsored prayer in public schools, but this has not stopped many parents and school authorities from trying to reinstate school prayer, or at least prayer-like moments of silence. The discovery that a federal agency, the National Endowment for the Arts, had given money to support exhibitions and performances that many people thought were obscene led to a furious congressional struggle over the future of the agency.

The culture war differs from other political disputes (over such matters as taxes, business regulations, and foreign policy) in several ways: money is not always at stake, compromises are almost impossible to arrange, and the conflict is more profound. It is animated by deep differences in people's beliefs about private and public morality—that is, about the standards that ought to govern individual behavior and social arrangements. It is about what kind of country we ought to live in, not just about what kinds of policies our government ought to adopt.

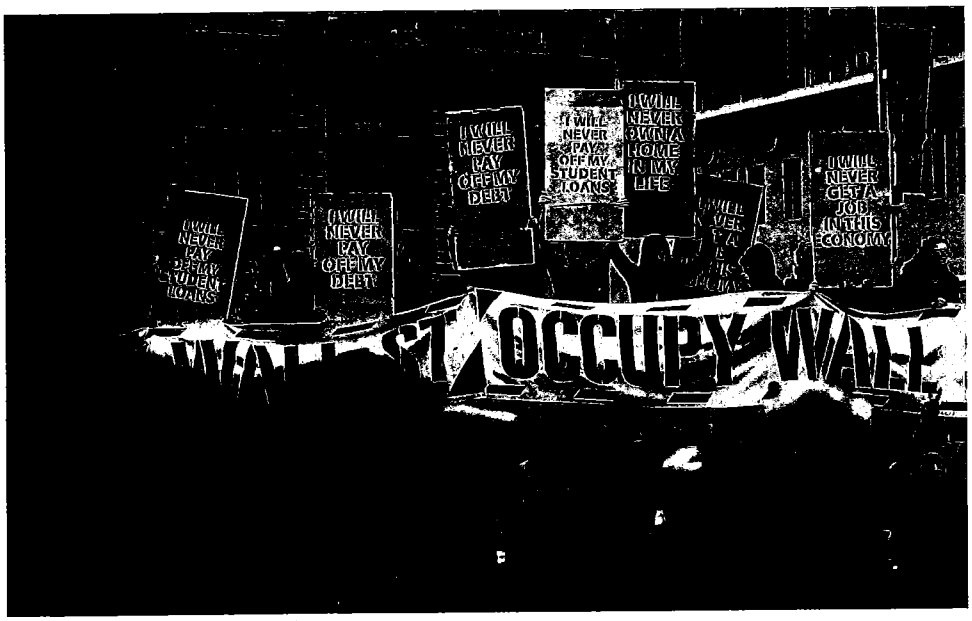
Two opposing views exist about the importance of the culture war. One view, developed by Morris Fiorina and others, holds that politically, the culture war is a myth. While political leaders are polarized, most Americans occupy a middle position. Journalists write about the split between "blue states" (those that vote Democratic) and "red states" (those that vote Republican), but in fact popular views across both kinds of states on many policy issues are similar.[33]

The rival view, developed by Alan Abramowitz and others, holds that more and more people are choosing their party affiliations on the basis of the party's position on moral issues. Moreover, a growing percentage of the public is politically engaged; that is, they do more to express their political views than simply vote.[34] Choosing between these two theories (which are discussed more fully in Chapter 7) will take time, as we watch what happens in future elections.

Mistrust of Government

One aspect of public opinion worries many people. Since the late 1950s, there has been a more or less steady decline in the proportion of Americans who say they trust the government in Washington to do the right thing. In the past, polls showed that about three-quarters of Americans said they trusted Washington most of the time or just about always. The percentage of people who say they trust the government has on occasion gone up (e.g., during the first term of the Reagan presidency, and again just after the 9/11 terrorist attacks), but by and large trust has been waning since at least the mid-1960s (see Figure 4.4).

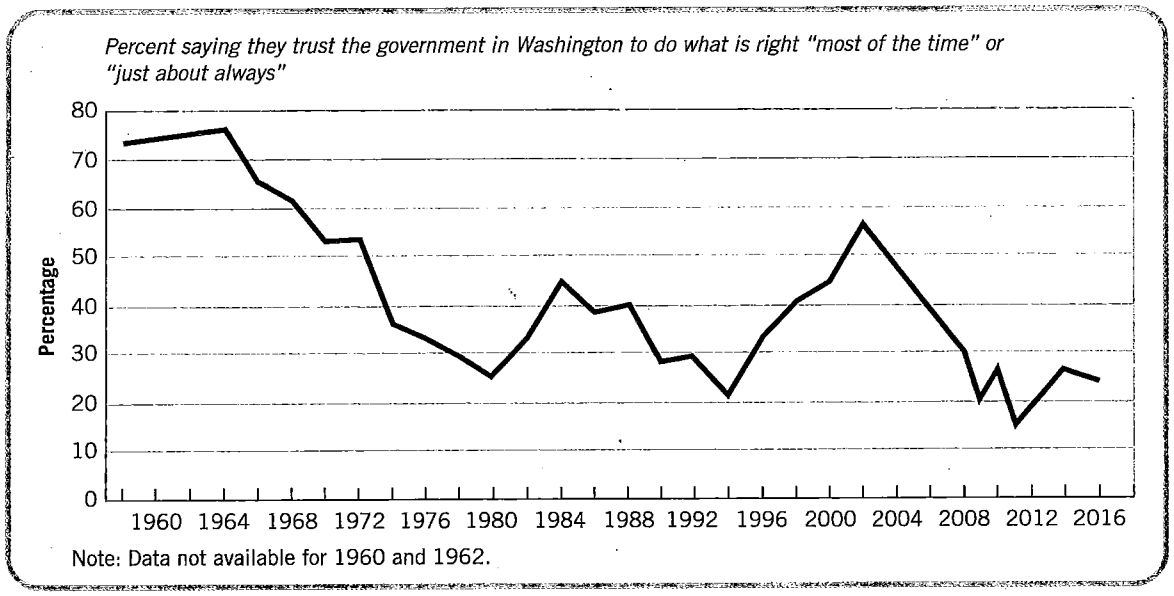
Before we misinterpret this, we should remember that people are talking about government officials, not the system of government. Americans are much more supportive of the country and its institutions than Europeans



Paul Taggart/Bloomberg via Getty Images

Demonstrators from the Occupy Wall Street movement protested income inequality for several weeks in New York City in the fall of 2011, before New York City police cleared their camp area in lower Manhattan.

FIGURE 4.4 **Trust in the Federal Government, 1958–2014**



Source: Pew Research Center, "Public Trust in Government: 1958–2014," http://www.people-press.org/2014/11/13/public-trust-in-government/.

are of theirs. Even so, the public decline in confidence in our officials is striking. There are all sorts of explanations for why it has happened. In the 1960s, there was our unpopular war in Vietnam; in the 1970s, President Richard Nixon had to resign because of his involvement in the Watergate scandal; in the 1990s, President Bill Clinton went through scandals that led to his impeachment by the House of Representatives (but was not convicted of that charge by the Senate); and beginning in 2003, President George W. Bush presided over a divisive war in Iraq.

But there is another way of looking at the matter. Maybe in the 1950s we had an abnormally *high* level of confidence in government, one that could never be expected to last no matter what any president did. After all, when President Dwight Eisenhower took office in 1952, we had won a war against fascism, overcome the Depression of the 1930s, possessed a near monopoly of the atom bomb, had a currency that was the envy of the world, and dominated international trade. Moreover, in those days not much was expected out of Washington. Hardly anybody thought there should be important federal laws about civil rights, crime, illegal drugs, the environment, the role of women, highway safety, or almost anything else now on the national agenda. Since nobody expected much out of Washington, nobody was upset that they didn't get much out of it.

The 1960s and 1970s changed all of that. Domestic turmoil, urban riots, a civil rights revolution, the war in Vietnam, economic inflation, and a new concern for the environment dramatically increased what we expected Washington to do. And since these problems are very difficult ones to solve, a lot of people became convinced that our politicians couldn't do much.[35]

Those events also pushed the feelings Americans had about their country—that is, their patriotism—into the background. We liked the country, but there weren't many occasions when expressing that approval seemed to make much sense. But on September 11, 2001, when hijacked airliners were crashed by terrorists into the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, all of that changed. There was an extraordinary outburst of patriotic fervor; flags were displayed everywhere, fire and police heroes were widely celebrated, and there was strong national support for our going to war in Afghanistan to find the key terrorist, Osama bin Laden, and destroy the tyrannical Taliban regime that he supported. By November of that year, about half of all Americans of both political parties said they trusted Washington officials to do what is right most of the time, the highest level in many years.

Those who had hoped or predicted that this new level of support would last, not ebb and flow, have been disappointed. In October 2001, 57 percent of Americans (up from just 29 percent in July 2001) said they trusted the federal government to do what is right always or most of the time. But by May 2002, only 40 percent expressed such trust in the federal government, and 57 percent said they trusted Washington only some of the time or never. And by January 2013, the fraction that said they trusted the federal government to do what is right always or most of the time had fallen to about a quarter, while the percentage that said they trusted Washington only some of the

civil society **Voluntary action that makes cooperation easier.**

time or never had risen to about three-quarters.

Only 13 percent of all Americans have a lot of confidence in Congress, but it—and the rest of the government—should not feel lonely. With few exceptions, Americans have lost confidence in many institutions. As Figure 4.5 shows, newspapers, public schools, television news, and labor unions have all suffered a big drop in public confidence during the last three decades. Only the military has gained support (75 percent of us say we have "a great deal" or "a lot" of confidence in it).

Because Americans are less likely than they once were to hold their leaders in high esteem, to have confidence in government policies, and to believe the system will be responsive to popular wishes, some observers like to say that Americans today are more "alienated" from politics. Perhaps this is true, but careful studies of the subject have not yet been able, for example, to demonstrate any relationship between overall levels of public trust in government or confidence in leaders, on the one hand, and the rates at which people come out to vote, on the other. There is, however, some evidence that the less voters trust political institutions and leaders, the more likely they are to support candidates from the nonincumbent major party (in two-candidate races) and third-party candidates.[36]

Civil Society

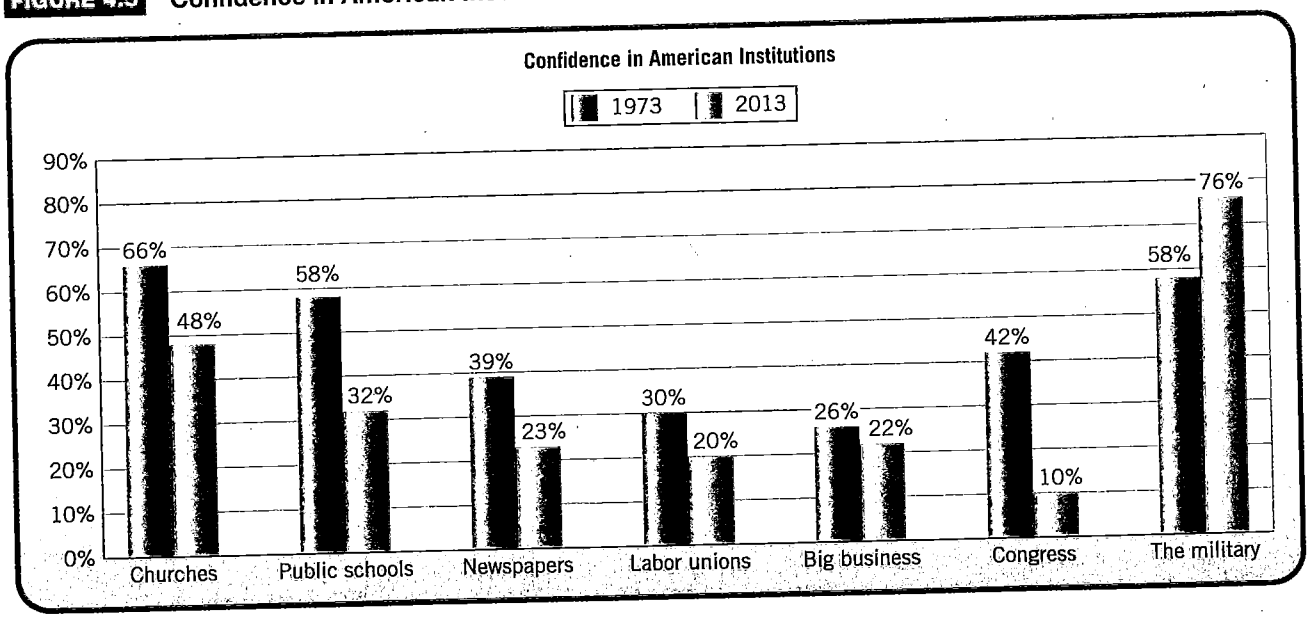
Distrust of governmental and other institutions makes more important the role of **civil society**, that collection of private, voluntary groups that—independent of the government and the commercial market—make human cooperation easier and provide ways of holding the government accountable for its actions.

The individualism of the American political culture makes civil society especially important. As we shall see in Chapter 11, Americans are more likely than people in other democracies to join voluntary groups. These organizations teach people how to cooperate, develop community service skills, and increase social capital. This last phrase refers to the connections people have with each other through friendship, personal contact, and group efforts.

Several scholars, such as Robert Putnam, argue that the more social capital a community has, the greater the level of trust among its members. And the more trust that exists, the easier it is to achieve common goals such as improving a neighborhood, combating intolerance, and producing useful projects outside of government. Putnam worries that our social capital may be decreasing because people are less and less likely to join voluntary associations. In Putnam's famous phrase, we once bowled in leagues; now we bowl alone. We once joined the PTA, the NAACP, and the Veterans of Foreign Wars; now we stay home and watch television or spend time on our computer.[37]

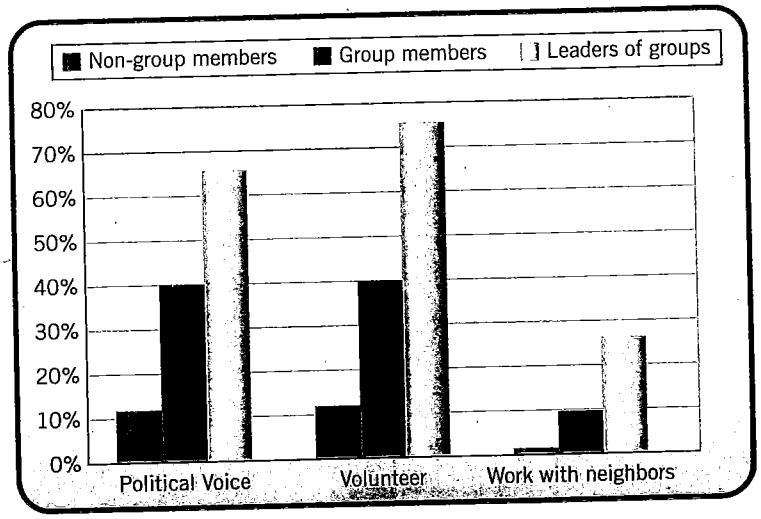
There are three qualifications to this argument. First, Americans still join more groups than people in most other democracies. Second, a general measure of civic health (that examines group membership and informal human contact) shows high engagement by group leaders (see Figure 4.6). Third, in ethnically and racially diverse communities, we "hunker down"—that is, we don't trust our neighbors, contribute to charities, cooperate with others, or join voluntary groups.[38] Just where we most need social capital, we do not have as much as we would like.

FIGURE 4.5 Confidence in American Institutions



Source: Gallup Poll, "Confidence in Institutions: Historical Trends," June 2013.

FIGURE 4.6 **The American Civic Health Index, 2009**



Source: 2010 Civic Health Assessment: Executive Summary, "Involvement by Group Membership" (Washington, D.C.: National Conference on Citizenship, September 2010), 3.

Furthermore, in the post-9/11 world, young people in the United States have demonstrated increased interest in public affairs and civic engagement. But this heightened involvement appears to be most pronounced for people with high incomes; Putnam describes this division as "a growing civic and social gap in the United States between upper-middle-class young white people and their less affluent counterparts."[39] And in his 2015 book *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*, Putnam examines how children in economically well-off families are far more likely to experience social capital in their homes, schools, and activities than children whose families face severe economic difficulties.[40] Without social capital, economic and social mobility become daunting, not realistic, goals. A major societal challenge for the 9/11 generation will be to expand opportunities for making the American dream a reality, and keeping public confidence in American political culture.

Political Tolerance

Democratic politics depends crucially on citizens' reasonable tolerance of the opinions and actions of others. If unpopular speakers were always shouted down, if government efforts to censor newspapers were usually met with popular support or even public indifference, if peaceful demonstrations were regularly broken up by hostile mobs, if the losing candidates in an election refused to allow their victorious opponents to take office, then the essential elements of a democratic political culture would be missing, and democracy would fail. Democracy does not require perfect tolerance; if it did, the passions of human nature would make democracy forever impossible. But at a minimum, citizens must have a political culture that allows the discussion of ideas and the selection of rulers in an atmosphere reasonably free of oppression.

Public opinion surveys show that the overwhelming majority of Americans agree with concepts such as freedom of speech, majority rule, and the right to circulate petitions—at least in the abstract.[41] But when we get down to concrete cases, a good many Americans are not very tolerant of groups they dislike. Suppose you must decide which groups will be in a community public auditorium. Which of these groups would *you* say should be permitted to hold a meeting?

1. A religious group hosting a revival meeting
2. A school–parent organization that opposes mandatory annual testing
3. Concerned citizens protesting the building of a cellphone tower near their homes
4. A women's-rights organization campaigning for stronger legislation to punish sexual harassment in the workplace
5. A civil-rights group that advocates for gay marriage
6. Atheists preaching against God
7. Students organizing a sit-in to protest school dress codes

One person's civic intolerance can be another person's heartfelt display of civic concern. Some Americans believe that serious civic problems are rooted in a breakdown of moral values.[42] Correctly or not, some citizens worry that the nation is becoming too tolerant of behaviors that harm society, and they favor defending common moral standards over protecting individual rights.

What Would You Do?

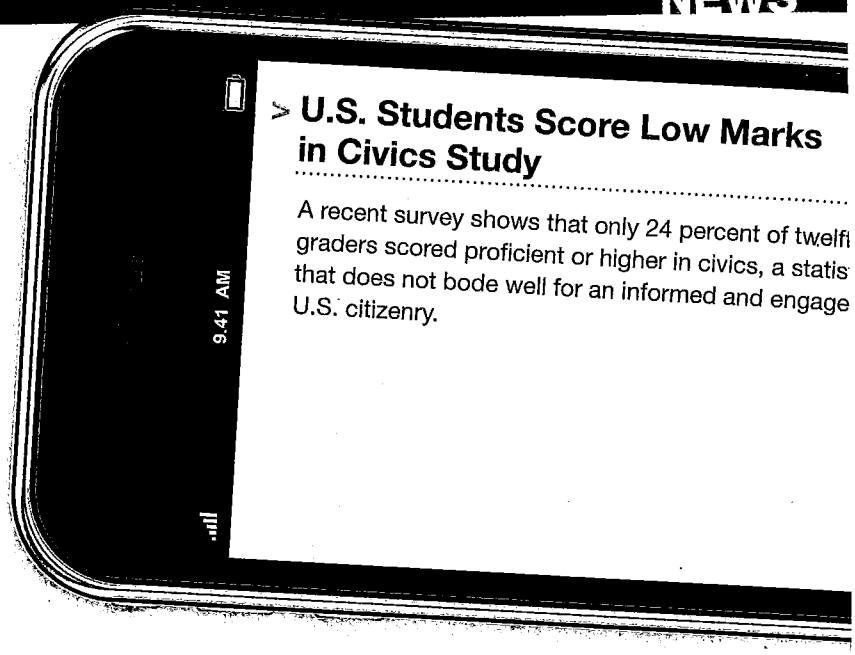
Memorandum

To: *White House Chief of Staff Jae Long*

From: *Secretary of Education Ena Sophia*

Subject: *Civics education in schools*

The decline in political knowledge that Americans have about our governmental system is alarming. We need to work in partnership with Congress and the states to promote civic education in secondary schools. In her upcoming State of the Union message, the President needs to make a case for high school civics education and endorse the creation of a bipartisan task force to develop guidelines for such classes.



Arguments for:

1. A recent survey finds that only about 6 of 10 Americans can name the vice president, and more than half believe incorrectly that the Supreme Court prohibits public school classes that compare world religions.
2. Schools have a responsibility to teach students the principles of American constitutionalism, such as federalism and separation of church and state.
3. If the federal government does not take the initiative in promoting civics education, then states will develop their own standards, which will weaken understanding of our shared political principles.

Arguments against:

1. Civics education needs to be incorporated into existing courses, not taught separately.
2. Individuals need to take responsibility for understanding the political system in which they live.
3. Based on their individual historical experiences, states are better prepared than the federal government to determine how the underlying principles of American politics should be taught in their classrooms.

Your decision ◯ **Support** ◯ **Oppose**

Nonetheless, this majority tolerance for many causes hould not blind us to the fact that for most of us, there is ome group or cause from which we are willing to withold political liberties—even though we endorse those berties in the abstract.

If most people dislike one or another group strongly nough to deny it certain political rights that we usually ake for granted, how is it that such groups (and such ghts) survive? The answer, in part, is that most of us don't ct on our beliefs. We rarely take the trouble—or have the hance—to block another person from making a speech or eaching school. Some scholars have argued that among eople who are in a position to deny other people rights—fficeholders and political activists, for example—the level f political tolerance is somewhat greater than among the ublic at large, but that claim has been strongly disputed.[43]

But another reason may be just as important. Most of s are ready to deny *some* group its rights, but we usually an't agree on which group that should be. Sometimes we an agree, and then the disliked group may be in for real ouble. There have been times (1919–1920, and again in e early 1950s) when socialists and communists were disked by most people in the United States. The government n each occasion took strong actions against them. Today, ewer people agree that these left-wing groups are a major omestic threat, and so their rights are now more secure.

Finally, the courts are sufficiently insulated from pub- opinion that they can act against majority sentiments nd enforce constitutional protections (see Chapter 16). Most of us are not willing to give all rights to all groups, ut most of us are not judges.

These facts should be a sober reminder that political berty cannot be taken for granted. Men and women are ot, it would seem, born with an inclination to live and let ve, at least politically, and many—possibly most—never cquire that inclination. Liberty must be learned and rotected. Happily, the United States during much of its ecent history has not been consumed by revulsion for ny one group, at least not revulsion strong enough to lace the group's rights in jeopardy.

Nor should any part of society pretend that it is always more tolerant than another. In the 1950s, for example, ultraconservatives outside the universities were attacking the rights of professors to say and teach certain things. In the 1960s and 1970s, ultraliberal students and professors inside the universities were attacking the rights of other students and professors to say certain things.

The American system of government is supported by a political culture that fosters a sense of civic duty, takes pride in the nation's constitutional arrangements, and provides support for the exercise of essential civil liberties. In recent decades, mistrust of government officials (though not of the system itself) has increased, and confidence in their responsiveness to popular feelings has declined.

Although Americans value liberty in both the political system and the economy, they believe equality is important in the political realm. In economic affairs, they wish to see equality of opportunity but accept inequality of results.

Not only is our culture generally supportive of democratic rule, it also has certain distinctive features that make our way of governing different from what one finds in other democracies. Americans are preoccupied with their rights, and this fact, combined with a political system that (as we shall see) encourages the vigorous exercise of rights and claims, gives to our political life an *adversarial* style. Unlike Swedes or Japanese, we do not generally reach political decisions by consensus, and we often do not defer to the authority of administrative agencies. American politics, more than that of many other nations, is shot through at every stage with protracted conflict.

But as we shall learn in the next chapter, that conflict is not easily described as, for example, always pitting liberals against conservatives. Not only do we have a lot of conflict, it is often messy conflict, a kind of political Tower of Babel. Foreign observers sometimes ask how we stand the confusion. The answer, of course, is that we have been doing it for more than 200 years. Maybe our Constitution is two centuries old, not in spite of this confusion, but because of it. We shall see.

EARNING OBJECTIVES

-1 Explain the concept of political culture and its key components in the United States.

Political culture refers to long-standing patterns in how people view government, politics, and the economy. Key components of American political culture include liberty, equality (of opportunity), democracy, civic duty, and individual responsibility.

4-2 Discuss how the United States differs from other countries in its political culture.

The question of whether the United States is "exceptional" among democracies sparks much debate among social scientists and historians. While characteristics of American exceptionalism are difficult to identify and measure, surveys discussed in this chapter do show that Americans

view government, politics, religion, and economics differently than citizens of other advanced industrialized democracies.

American political culture has imbued it with more tolerance and a greater respect for orderly procedures and personal rights than can be found in nations with constitutions like ours. Americans are willing to let whoever wins an election govern without putting up a fuss, and the U.S. military does not intervene.

4-3 Identify the key sources of political culture in the United States.

People learn the concepts of political culture from their families, schools, organizations (including religious groups), and interactions with the government—federal, state, and local.

4-4 Evaluate how American political culture affects public confidence in government and tolerance of different political views.

Compared to the 1950s, we are much less likely to think the government does the right thing or cares about what we think. But when we look at our system of government—the Constitution and our political culture—we are very pleased with it. Americans are much more patriotic than people in many other democracies. And we display a great deal of support for churches in large measure because we are more religious than most Europeans.

TO LEARN MORE

Polling organizations that frequently measure aspects of political culture:

www.ropercenter.uconn.edu

www.gallup.com

U.S. Census Bureau: **www.census.gov**

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