

Texas Political Culture

Lessons Overview

Learning Objectives

1. Explain the origins of Texas government.
2. Identify the values that characterize Texas' political culture and describe the factors and conditions fostering that culture.
3. Describe the racial and ethnic composition of Texas' population and identify important demographic trends.
4. Discuss the evolution of the Texas economy and assess the economic and financial challenges facing the state in the 21st century.

Video: Texas Political Culture

Texans possess a strong sense of state identity, shaped by a distinctive history and culture. Rooted in rugged individualism and southern tradition, Texas political culture places a premium on individual liberty and harbors a distrust of government. This video introduces the cultural, historical, and social context of Texas politics and examines whether a political culture formed in the 19th century has evolved in the 21st century.

Video Focus Points:

Look for answers to these questions when watching the video:

- What is the basis of Texas government?
- How might technology and changing demographics alter the limited government style of Texas?

Video script:

Music introduction

Narrator: Texas has a colorful heritage, and a legendary mystique that is larger-than-life.

Cowboys and cotton...

Rangers and rancheros...

Outlaws and oilmen...

The Alamo and independence...

Much of the mythology has long since faded into history, but the influence of Texas' unique heritage can still be seen in the political culture today.

Sonia Garcia, Associate Professor of Political Science, St. Mary's University: We were our own independent nation for close to ten years, and even though this was back in the 1830s I think it's still very much embedded in how we view ourselves as Texans.

The reality was that many families and individuals migrated to Texas and there was no government... there was no services... and so the experience led to self-reliance and these attitudes, these values, these experiences are so embedded in Texas that they still are very much manifested today.

Narrator: Texas has a strong sense of what political scientists call an individualistic political culture, fueled by its history of independence and the challenges of life on the frontier.

David Prindle, Professor of Government, University of Texas at Austin: The individualist political culture is very much like the idea we have in America of the myth of the frontier. That is, that the West was subdued by individuals with peacemakers on their hips, riding across a plains, alone. Individualists strongly prefer individual freedom and are always skeptical of government projects to help them.

Jonathan Neerman, Chairman, Dallas County Republican Party: Texans want to build things on their own without government assistance. They want the government off their back. Let me go

out, stake my own claim, take care of my family on my own. But I want government to stay out, except in limited circumstances.

Narrator: While the frontier experience brought a streak of rugged individualism to Texas political culture, the state's southern heritage planted it firmly in conservative soil.

David Prindle: Political scientists have often characterized Southern political culture as what they call a traditionalist political culture when it comes to social issues – race, guns, religion. On issues such as those, Southerners...Texans are much more conservative than people in the rest of the country.

Sonia Garcia: The traditionalistic political subculture originates in the plantation system of the old South, which very much relied on slave labor, and so property and wealth very much defined our social hierarchy.

Under the traditionalistic political subculture, government was designed to have a very minimal role and that was simply to maintain the social and racial hierarchy, with very minimal intervention in people's lives.

Guitar music

David Prindle: Southern governments have been less interested in promoting the political participation of ordinary people than have governments in the rest of the country.

Sonia Garcia: Here in Texas, unfortunately we don't have a very high voter participation. With such low voter participation, it's more likely than that interest groups with the resources and the influence will likely shape Texas politics.

Narrator: Texas political culture combines the conservatism of the South with the individualism of a frontier state. Both influences contribute to a sense that where government is concerned, less is more. Austin may boast the largest state capitol building in North America, but it doesn't reflect most Texans' preference for the size of their government.

Jessica Monforti, Assistant Professor of Political Science, University of Texas – Pan American: I think Texans' fondness for limited government manifests itself in several ways. Our Constitution clearly sets up a government that is limited. We have a short legislative term. We have what we want to call unprofessional legislators that serve, but also typically have to have

some job outside of that because we pay them so little. We have a plural executive with a weak governor system. We have the election rather than the appointment of judges. So those are all structural issues that absolutely limit the power of government.

On the process side, I think we can talk about the lack of progressivist reforms. So we don't have referendum. We don't have statewide initiative. We don't have recall. We don't have a state income tax.

Elise Hu, Journalist and Political reporter, Austin, TX: This has helped Texas become the leading state in terms of fortune 500 companies and growing jobs in a time when there were a lot of states shutting jobs. So arguably it can be a good thing. There's a lot of people wanting to come to Texas and you have to wonder, is that because we don't have a state income tax? But then, on the flip side of the equation there are a lot of social problems that Texas faces.

David Prindle: Year after year, Texas state government spends less per person than any government of any other state. Texas state government, for example, spends less on environmental protection than almost any other state. If you think about the things that state governments traditionally do – education, welfare, and so forth – Texas ranks very low in almost all of them on a per capita basis.

Funky music

Narrator: The 21st century has brought change, and new challenges, to Texas. Cotton, cattle and oil have been replaced with high-tech industries, financial services, and green energy. The economy is more complex, diversified, and integrated into the global economy.

Sonia Garcia: We need to devote much more attention and funds for education, both public education and higher education. We are increasingly competing in a globalized economy and so we need to devote more resources to ensure that our populace is trained and skilled and educated.

Music

Narrator: Once a rural state dotted with hundreds of small towns, Texas now boasts three of the top-ten most populous cities in the United States. Today, more than 80 percent of an increasingly diverse population lives in urban areas.

Jessica Monforti: There are a lot of challenges that Texas is going to face as we move on into this 21st century and I think probably the biggest one is dealing with two shifts in population – one, its increasing diversity, and two, its increasing urbanization. How are we going to deal with issues of mass transportation in our cities? How are we going to deal with bilingual education beyond just Spanish in our public school systems?

Narrator: The changing face of the Texas population may also bring change to its political culture. Anglos, who have dominated Texas politics for almost two centuries, are no longer a majority of the population.

David Prindle: Some estimates say by 2030, some other estimates say by 2040, Hispanics will be a majority in Texas. Now that has a variety of important possible consequences for the future. One is that Hispanics tend to be more liberal and more democratic in their voting than do Anglos.

Elise Hu: Democrats and Republicans are both going to have to fight for their vote, even though as we've seen lately, they don't vote in huge numbers or at least not in the numbers reflective of their size, their population size.

Narrator: When it comes to state politics, Texas' colorful history casts a big shadow. But increasingly an even bigger question is looming – how will a government and political culture shaped by the nineteenth century adapt to meet the needs of Texans in the 21st century?

David Prindle: The myth of individualism tends to be very strongly anti-government, reflexively anti-government, and people who think of themselves as Clint Eastwood riding across the high plains with a .45 on his hip are not inclined to want to think about collective responsibility such as health insurance. And so Texans, in general, are in favor of very low taxes even if that means very low government services.

Jonathan Neerman: Texans very much like limited government, lower taxes, and trying to find creative approaches to solving the real world problems under that framework. And so moving forward, it's up to government and the citizens to find creative solutions to these problems without adding additional burdens to future generations.

End of video.

Study Questions

Look for answers to these questions throughout the lesson:

1. How does Texas compare to other states in the following categories?
 - a. Geographic size
 - b. Population
 - c. Racial and ethnic diversity
2. Describe the governmental experience of Texas prior to its independence from Mexico.
3. Give examples of how the Spanish colonial influence left its mark on Texas' political and legal culture.
4. Identify the values that compose Texas political culture. What historical/geographical factors contributed to the development of this culture?
5. Summarize the mythological significance of the following three symbols:
 - a. Cowboys
 - b. Rangers
 - c. Wildcatters
6. Describe the influence of the frontier era on Texas' political culture.
7. How has the geographic size of Texas impacted Texas politics?
8. On average, where would you place Texans on the ideological spectrum? Why?
9. What are the political implications of increased urbanization?
10. What is the ethnic and racial distribution of Texas' population? Which group has seen the most dramatic growth with potential long-term political consequences?
11. What commodities formed the basis of the Texas economy in the 19th century? How did this change in the early 20th century?
12. Describe the character of the modern Texas economy. Why is this economy an improvement over its traditional economy based on oil and other commodities?
13. Analyze three of the most important challenges facing Texas policymakers in the 21st century.