

Texas Political Culture

Roots of Texas Politics

Political culture is a shared system of values, beliefs, and habits of behavior with regard to government and politics. Multiple cultures may coexist in a society, but typically one culture is dominant and those dominant values, beliefs, and habits of behavior affect all members of society.

Texas combines the individualistic and traditionalistic political cultures. A legacy of the state's western frontier heritage, the individualistic political culture celebrates individual achievement—the lone cowboy riding the range, the singular sheriff, the "one-fight, one-Ranger" attitude. Government activity is encouraged only to the extent that it creates opportunity for individual achievement. The traditionalistic political culture, emphasizing deference to elite rule within a hierarchical society, represents the values of 19th century Southerners who migrated to the rich cotton land of East Texas. Government activity is discouraged unless it reinforces the power of society's dominant groups.

Taken together, individualism and traditionalism make Texas a politically conservative state, hostile to government activity, especially government interference in the economy. Government is expected to stay out of people's affairs, and when it does get involved, it should be controlled locally. Government should spend little and tax little, if at all. Individual businesspeople should control their own fate and the economy. Texas political culture mixes economic conservatism with a conservative approach to social life, in which government becomes a barrier against any change to the political and socioeconomic hierarchy that might result from individual competition.

Individualism and traditionalism blend with a philosophy of social Darwinism, a belief in survival of the fittest—absent governmental interference, those who rise to the top deserve it, and those who fall to the bottom also deserve it. It is not the government's responsibility to pick them up. Social Darwinists believe that poverty results from natural selection and is therefore not something to be fixed by government.

However, there is also a strong populist streak in Texas political culture that believes government power should be used to protect individuals from exploitation by powerful

corporations, excessive wealth, or government itself. This populist streak sometimes mixes with liberalism, which endorses government intervention as a welcome force in society. Populism and liberalism are real parts of Texas political culture that influence the state's government and politics, but they have typically remained subordinate to the dominant conservative political culture rooted in individualism and traditionalism.

Leave Me Alone Chili

Political culture, like bowls of chili, are not homogeneous throughout the United States, (e.g., true Texans do not put beans in their chili). For example, there is a bowl of moralistic political culture popular in the northern portion of the United States, in which the government is the primary ingredient for promoting the public welfare and using its authority to improve the social and economic well-being of its citizens. Or, if you live in the central part of the nation, you may prefer a bowl of individualistic political culture. This recipe cuts down on government involvement in citizens' private activities and is heavy on the importance of individual and private initiatives. Residents in the southern tier of states from the East coast to New Mexico relish the traditionalist political culture. In this culture, government acts as a preservative; keeping traditions and the existing social order safe from change. Only top chefs from established families or influential social groups should make this chili.

Texas has its own unique bowl of political culture. It combines a mixture of traditionalistic and individualistic ingredients with a dash of the Old South and the frontier experience. This activity focuses on how the ingredients that make up Texas political culture are reflected in its public policies and practices.

Interactive Activity: Leave Me Alone Chili

Focuses on how Texas public policies and practices reflect its political culture. Texas' political culture is evident in its low per-capita spending, pro-business environment, and emphasis on self-reliance instead of social programs.

Virtual Roundtable

Texas political culture combines the conservatism of the South with the individualism of a frontier state. Both contribute to a philosophy concerning government that "less is more." Does Texas political culture help or hinder state government when facing the challenges of the 21st century?

Video: Elise Hu, Journalist & Political Reporter, Austin, TX

Video script:

What you see depends on where you stand in terms of whether the Texas political culture is an asset or a liability. It really depends on whom you ask. If you are somebody who's pro-business, pro-economic growth, this tends to be Republicans in Texas, low regulation, all the...all the good things that have come out of Texas in terms of the business culture, economic...economic situation, you can attribute in some ways to the fact that this is a place where there's not a whole lot of business regulation, not a whole lot of environmental regulation. But then on the flip side of the equation, there are a lot of social problems that Texas faces. We mentioned healthcare, previously, and education. These are areas where, because social services aren't very well funded, there's a lot of people going without. There's a lot of people going without health insurance. Insurance rates in general, home, auto, are very high and you have to wonder, is that because business interests really are number one here in the state of Texas. So it really depends on where you stand. It's a perspective question.

End of video.

Video: Jonathan Neerman, Former Chairman (2008-2011), Dallas County Republican Party

Video script:

I think Texas political culture is an asset going forward in this regard. 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.

Video: Jim Hightower, Populist and Political Commentator, Texas Agricultural Commissioner (1982-1991)

Video script:

I think there are two different political cultures in Texas. One is the culture of the established government and the lobbyists that essentially run that government, which do look out for themselves. The lobbyists support the incumbents. The incumbents support the lobbies. Then there's the larger culture out in the countryside of just ordinary working stiffs, dirt farmers, old folks, poor folks. You know, this is the majority of the people of our state. We're a state really of mavericks and mutts. That's who settled Texas and that's who we are today. Yet, these folks and their instinct for little "d" democratic policies, as well as politics, are largely not represented or not even considered by the inside culture of politics.

End of video.

Video: Allan Saxe, Associate Professor of Political Science, University of Texas at Arlington

Video script:

I think it's still an asset because we like to pride ourselves on individuality...entrepreneurship. But there could be some friction with the national government, because it seems like again, as we speak at this moment, the national government is moving toward becoming stronger, more powerful, perhaps taking away some of the responsibilities that used to be with the state government and education is one of those, healthcare. So all the issues, all these great policy changes to a great extent are dependent on what the national government begins to do and where they move in the next several years.

End of video.

Video: Jessica Lavariega Monforti, Assistant Professor of Political Science, University of Texas – Pan American

Video script:

I think the increasing diversification of the population in Texas will mean conflict for our political culture. And what do I mean by that? First of all, to say that we're going to have a majority-minority state glosses over all of the different groups that we're talking about that make up the minority groups, right? So we're going to have African-Americans. We're going to have Hispanics of various different nationalities and ethnic backgrounds and the...no one is really talking about the rapid growth of the Asian and Asian-American population in Texas. But it's growing by leaps and bounds. So there's going to be conflict because there's going to be competition between these groups. As Anglos sort of become a smaller part of the population, who will be the victor of those spaces in housing and employment, in education across the board? When we have the view that there are a finite number of resources and all of these new people coming to the table who want those new resources, right, we have a rush for those resources. And so conflict is really sort of what I see on the horizon and how do we as a state, as our state government, deal with those conflicts. That really will determine the next twenty-five years of Texas politics. How do we deal with the inevitable conflict and competition that we will see come out of the diversification of the population?

End of video.

Additional Resources

Websites

[Texas Almanac](http://www.texasalmanac.com)

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“The source for all things Texas since 1857.” Portions of this annual compilation are available for free online, including information on state and local government, regional demographics, educational and environmental issues.

Books: Lonesome Dove, by Larry McMurtry

This 1985 Pulitzer prize-winning novel tells the story of several retired Texas Rangers and their adventures driving a cattle herd from Texas to Montana. The book was later made into an award-winning television miniseries starring Robert Duvall and Tommy Lee Jones.

Films/Videos: Giant (1956), directed George Stevens.

Rock Hudson stars as the confident, stubborn young ranch baron Bick Benedict, who weds Leslie (Elizabeth Taylor), an eastern socialite, and moves her to his sprawling West Texas cattle ranch. Also stars James Dean as Jett Rink, a ranch hand who strikes it rich in oil, the new commodity in Texas. Adapted from Edna Ferber's classic novel, director George Stevens won his second Oscar for this ambitious epic of the changing socioeconomic and physical landscape of modern Texas.