

# American Political Culture

## Lesson Overview

### Learning Objectives

1. Describe prominent features of American political culture.
2. Classify the competing ideological traditions of conservatism, liberalism and socialism.
3. Compare and contrast American political culture with the political cultures of other developed democracies.
4. Give specific examples of how American political culture shapes government institutions and policies.

### Introduction

Political culture is a phrase used to describe popular attitudes and beliefs about the appropriate role of government in a society. While every country is different, a long line of political observers has claimed that the United States is even more different than most other developed democracies. Americans are more religious, more individualistic, and more suspicious of government than their European or Japanese counterparts. The United States is the only modern democracy that has never had an effective socialist party, does not guarantee health care as basic right, and still uses the death penalty. In a word, the United States' political culture is "exceptional." This lesson uses the comparative method to explore possible explanations for and the consequences of this exceptionalism.

### Study Questions

1. What is political culture and why is it important?
2. Identify key values comprising the following political ideologies:
  - a. Conservatism
  - b. Liberalism
  - c. Socialism
  - d. Libertarianism

3. Describe how ideology relates to political culture.
4. What ideological tradition has enjoyed hegemonic status in the United States?
5. How is the liberal tradition embedded in American political culture and practice? Give specific examples with reference to:
  - a. The role and size of government
  - b. Americans' attitudes towards the economy
  - c. The welfare state
  - d. The relationship between government and religion
  - e. Health care
6. How do these examples contrast with other economically developed democracies?
7. In what other ways does American political culture differ from the democratic norm? Discuss with reference to:
  - a. The American justice system
  - b. The death penalty
  - c. Nationalism
  - d. Religiosity
8. Based on the many differences considered above, do you think it is possible to judge the relative merits or flaws of American political culture vis-à-vis its democratic counterparts?