

American Political Culture

Influences of Classical Liberalism

The influence of classical liberalism profoundly shapes the culture and institutions of all modern democracies. All democracies, even when governed by socialist conservative parties, accept the premise of individual rights. Most democracies now have courts dedicated to the protection of these rights. Formal political equality ("one person, one vote") and legal equality (the notion that everyone enjoys the same rights in a courtroom regardless of their identities) is pervasive in all mature democracies. The idea of democracy itself, based on the principle of formal political and legal equality, is an outgrowth of the classical liberal tradition. All democracies, though they differ tremendously in the degree of its application, accept the principle of free markets. Since the late 1970s and early 1980s, democratic socialist programs promoting state management and/or state ownership of the economy have receded with the resurgence of neo-liberal economic theory. Liberalism's theme of freedom, broadly defined, constitutes a key pillar of every democratic regime.

It is in the United States and its idiosyncratic political culture, however, that classical liberalism romps like a Tyrannosaurus Rex, sending competing ideologies such as socialism scurrying like some pre-historic rodent and consigning classical conservative ideas to oblivion. In many democracies, classical liberalism competes on a more-or-less equal footing with socialist ideology. In all other democracies, classical liberalism coexists with the residual values and traditions of classical conservatism and the more robust egalitarianism of socialism. Classical liberalism enjoys hegemonic status as a political ideology, inscribed into the very fabric of the US Constitution. The values of classical liberalism may be abstract, but in the United States they assume very solid form in two significant respects: first, their effect on formal political institutions, second, in their pervasive presence in American political culture.

Shaping US Government

As for political institutions, classical liberalism's signature confronts the student of American government at every turn. It explains why our system's design is more complicated than the majority of democratic systems. Liberalism's distrust of political power is reflected in: (a) federalism, the vertical separation of powers between the national government and the states,

(b) separation of powers, the horizontal separation of powers among the three branches, and (c) checks and balances, the apportionment of specific veto or dilatory powers of one branch over the others (our system of national government is more accurately described as one of separate branches sharing powers).

Not content to fragment power among the federal government's three branches and the 50 states, the Constitution's framers even split the legislative branch, Congress, into two separate chambers, or bicameral, with distinct terms of service, qualifications, and institutional competencies. For example, the Senate specializes in foreign policy and appointment issues while the House initiates taxing and spending legislation. State governments mirror, and in some cases amplify, separation of powers. The Texas Constitution splits its supreme court into two bodies and fragments the executive power into several virtually independent offices. Indeed, some have characterized Texas government as classical liberalism on steroids.

The US Constitution fragments political power to an extent well beyond what most democratic states have done. As a presidential system the US is in a minority of democracies in having three distinct branches of government. Most democracies have parliamentary systems where the executive and legislative branches are not nearly as distinct. Many democratic states do not have a third branch of government, a judiciary, empowered to strike down acts of the executive or legislative branches as unconstitutional. Finally, most democracies are not federal democracies with power constitutionally divided between the national government and regional governments. In a unitary system, authority lies in the hands of a single central government, while in a confederation, sovereign constituent governments (states) create a central authority.

Formal institutions are only one half, and some political scientists would argue the less important half, of understanding a country's political system. Understanding a country's political culture, the shared beliefs and values of a country's citizens, is critical. Here the fingerprints of classical liberalism are unmistakable. First, consistent with liberalism's theme of limited government, Americans expect less of government, a fact reflected in the relatively small size of our government in relation to other economically advanced democracies. One measurement of a government's size is the percentage of GDP (gross domestic product) taken up by the national government's spending. At around 20 percent in 2004, US federal spending ranks among the lowest national spending by industrial nations. Another measurement is the percentage of a country's workers employed by the national government. In 2000, the federal government employed around 2 percent of the nation's workforce, down from 3.7 percent in

1960. In most advanced democracies, the national government employs a considerably higher percentage of the workforce. Finally, the effective tax rate of governments is often used as a proxy for government size. The relative tax burden of US citizens is significantly lower than in most industrial nations. While critics may decry big government in the United States, they are more persuasive if focusing on its absolute rather than relative size when compared with the community of economically advanced democracies.

Shaping American Political Culture

The relatively small size of American government, however, is not so much the direct product of classical liberalism as a symptom of the limited demands and expectations that Americans place on their government. Polling data confirms that classical liberalism shapes core political values in the United States. Americans have traditionally been more optimistic about the individual's opportunity for upward social mobility, without government aid, than citizens of other states are. They are less likely to think that it is the government's responsibility to take care of the poor. Government welfare policies reflect this national bias as the government spends comparatively little on support for the poor and unemployed. With a little help from electoral rules, popular resistance to government paternalism explains one of the more curious features of American party politics, specifically why socialism failed to thrive as a political movement in this country. The United States is the only democracy without an effective Socialist Party.

The United States' individualistic culture helps explain other dramatic differences between the United States and other advanced democracies. The United States is the only wealthy democracy that does not consider health care a basic right for its citizens. On a darker note, popular belief in individual responsibility illuminates why the United States is the only democracy, rich or poor, that still applies the death penalty for very serious crimes. Classical liberalism's principle of separating church and state, reinforced by the influx of persecuted religious minorities during our colonial years, has prevented the establishment of a state religion but fostered a robust market in religious freedom. Americans are distinctly more religious in their personal beliefs than citizens of most other advanced democracies. These beliefs shape electric debates over public policy, from abortion to same-sex marriage to the debate over prayer in school. The state's absence from the sphere of religious choice has paradoxically energized religious association in the United States, resulting in a dazzling variety of churches and sects. Classical liberalism's preference for liberty is also apparent in America's freedom of speech and

expression. Under the aegis of the Constitution's First Amendment, the United States allows a degree of freedom in communications arguably broader than that of any other country, extending to advocacy of political violence and hate speech.

One of the most attentive students of American political culture and institutions, Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville observed in the 1820s that the United States was an exceptional nation. He commented on the energy of its people, the ease with which they formed private associations, and their passion for social (though not economic) equality. America constituted for de Tocqueville a new species of political life offering a glimpse of the world's future. What he was witnessing was the first country where the ideas of classical liberalism took full bloom with no serious ideological competitors. As this is true of no other democracy, America remains a truly exceptional nation.

America's Exceptional Political Culture

Every country has one—a political culture comprised of attitudes, values, and beliefs about how government should operate. Understanding a country's political culture can help you make sense of the way a country's government is set up as well as the political decisions its leaders make.

Some aspects of American political culture are similar to those in other democratic nations. However, because of the philosophies and political ideologies (e.g., classical liberalism has its fingerprints all over our political culture) that guided the nation's Founders, there are aspects of our political culture that make us unique. Our political culture was born out of a revolution and stresses individualism, personal liberty, equality, private property, limited government, and popular consent.

This activity examines the uniqueness of America's political culture when compared to other democratic nations.

Interactive Activity: America's Exceptional Political Culture

Examines the uniqueness of American political culture when compared to other democratic nations. Americans are more individualistic and traditional than Europeans; the United States

ranks below many European countries in income inequality; class conflict is not as widespread in America as in other nations; it is the most churchgoing nation in the world; the level of support it provides for the poor through welfare, housing, and medical care is low; and its prison incarceration rate is higher than countries like Great Britain, Canada, and Japan.

Virtual Roundtable 1

Political culture is a phrase used to describe popular attitudes and beliefs about the appropriate role of government in a society. Many political observers have claimed the United States is different from most other developed democracies. In a word, they describe the United States' political culture as "exceptional." To what extent is America an "exceptional" nation?

Video: David Boaz, Executive Vice President, CATO Institute, Washington, DC

Video script:

American exceptionalism starts with an idea. America was born as a country based on an idea and that idea is life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, that this is a country intended to protect every individual's right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness and we set up a constitution to protect those rights and that's different. America is not the blood and the soil and the language. In a lot of countries, the language you speak is the country you are. In some countries it's more based on ethnicity. If you have the blood of our fathers in your genes, then that's – then you're one of us. America's not that way. It's always been a country of immigration and it's always been a country based on ideas and if you accept the American idea, then that's what makes you an American and that's what makes America exceptional.

End of video.

Video: Charles Haynes, Senior Scholar, First Amendment Center, Washington, DC

Video script:

We're only special or exceptional to the degree we live up to the ideals of our Framers. They didn't live up to it and they understood that. They fell short. We had slavery. Women couldn't

vote until recently, so there are many ways in which we didn't live up to this ideal of liberty and justice as what it means to be an American, but we – I think the story of American history really is the story of the ongoing struggle to live up to what we say we believe in and every successful social change in America, every movement toward greater justice and freedom has called people to live up to their ideals. That's what Martin Luther King did and what many others did, is to say to the American people, live up to what you say in the Charter you believe in or what you say in the Declaration of Independence you believe in, that all men are created equal, that everyone has certain inalienable rights. If we live up as the – if we keep trying to live up to that, then I think we are a special place.

End of video.

Video: Kelly J. Shackelford, Chief Council, Liberty Legal Institute

Video script:

I think one of the foundational reasons of why we're exceptional is number one, that we think our liberties come from God and that no government can take them away and that makes us very unusual and it makes us pretty bullheaded on our freedoms and willing to fight for them and I think that also somewhat leads to the sort of entrepreneurial spirit that we have in this country, the idea of competition, of free markets, that government's answers aren't better than competition between individuals or even competition between states and federalism. That kind of you know competition bringing the best out of us and still being able to put our arms around each other after the competition is over is, I think, what makes this such a great country and why people want to come here from all over the world. They don't want to come here because the government's going to give them something. They want to come here because they're ready to compete, because this is the land of opportunity where if you give it your all and do your best, you can do things you never dreamed of.

End of video.

Video: Randall Kennedy, Michael R. Klein Professor of Law, Harvard Law School

Video script:

I think by and large that American exceptionalism as it is -- has been come to be understood in our own time is mainly a type of nationalistic egotism. I mean, I think that the United States of America has a distinctive history. Every nation has a distinctive history. I think that the United States has made, you know, important contributions to the world. Many of them have been wonderful contributions. Some of them have been terrible contributions. I'm made very nervous by the -- you know, by the language of American exceptionalism when people make it seem as though we Americans have special virtues, special insights, special claims, a special destiny. That sort of view, I think, like I say, is often a Messianic view that's egotistical and often leads to places that I think ought to be avoided.

End of video.

Video: Richard Perle, US Assistant Secretary of Defense (1981-1987), Defense Policy Board Advisory Committee (1987-2004)

Video script:

I think America is an exceptional nation in a number of respects. The predominant ones being the robustness of our democracy, the brilliance of the Constitution and its evolution in remaining faithful to the vision of the free and open society. It's exceptional in the individual freedoms that are accorded to its citizens. There are very few places in Europe, for example, that offer the same constitutional protection that Americans enjoy, but most of all, it's exceptional in the opportunity it affords its people. People with an idea, with talent, with a skill, the sky's the limit in this country and in most other countries. The social and political structure really lowers people's sights and lowers their horizons. You're born into a certain class. You speak with a certain accent and there are limitations on where you can go.

End of video.

Video: Joseph Nye, Professor of International Relations, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University

Video script:

For a country, the resources that produce soft power and to be its culture when the culture is attractive in the eyes of others, its values, when it lives up to its values, isn't hypocritical about them and its policies, when its policies are seen as legitimate in the eyes of others. American values are attractive, openness and freedom, democracy. Not all, but in many parts of the world. It's when we don't live up to those values ourselves, for example, with the detention of people without trial in Guantanamo or the tortured people at Abu Ghraib in Iraq. That undercuts the attraction of our values because we're not living up to them ourselves.

End of video.

Video: David F. Prindle, Professor of Government, University of Texas at Austin

Video script:

The people who came to the United States were the sorts of people that philosophers refer to as classical liberals, that is they believed in middle class dominance, in democracy, in getting ahead in individual business and that those people passed on their ideas to their children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren and therefore, Americans as a whole tend to have an ideology that is anti-collective and there is some cross national public opinion research that tends to provide evidence in support of this idea. If you ask Italians, for example, whether the central government should be responsible for getting everyone a job and giving everyone health insurance, about two-thirds of Italians answer yes. If you ask the same question of Americans, only about one-third of Americans answer yes. So American ideology as a whole tends to be more anti-government action than the national ideology of many other countries.

End of video.

Virtual Roundtable 2

Religion played a significant role in the founding of the American republic and is part of the fabric of American life. Many have described the United States as a "Christian nation." Is this accurate?

Video: Charles Haynes, Senior Scholar, First Amendment Center, Washington, DC

Video script:

People ask me, you know, did the framers intend to found a Christian nation in the Constitution. I say well, where in the Constitution does it mention religion or Christianity or even God and it doesn't and it wasn't that they forgot. It's that they really wanted to found a secular nation that protected religious freedom. That was their intent. They didn't mean by secular, anti-religious. They meant by secular nation, a nation that for the first time in their experience would have no established religion, would not impose religion. So they put Article Six in there to make sure that – and Article Six says that there is no religious test for office in these United States. So they put that in there to make sure that we could actually never be a legal, official Christian nation, because unless you can have Christian leaders and enforce that, you can't ever be an established Christian nation, so they actually constitutionally prohibited that from the beginning and of course, later they added the First Amendment to make it even clearer that this is a nation of religious freedom, not a nation founded on any particular faith.

End of video.

Video: Sanford Levinson, Garwood Centennial Chair, Professor of Law, University of Texas School of Law

Video script:

America sociologically was a certain kind of Christian nation in 1787. One could say that sociologically it still is, but one of my favorite factoids is that there are more Buddhists in Houston, Texas, than there are Presbyterians and a lot of what I grew up thinking of as kind of the mainstream American Christian denominations are losing membership and all sorts of non-

Christian religions are becoming more important in the United States. Islam is also a very obvious example. So here are ways in which a lot of values have changed.

End of video.

Video: Kelly J. Shackelford, Chief Council, Liberty Legal Institute

Video script:

I think a lot of times the word Christian nation or the words Christian nation is just a semantical game. I think the thing we can all agree on is that most people in this country are Christian, but I think the reality is if you look at the fundamental principles that the Constitution, that our nation was founded upon, they're Judeo-Christian principles. Locke's Treatise on government which was probably the most used resource for the setting up of our frame of government, our Constitution and our laws. In that book, Locke I think quoted over 1,200 scriptures and there you know there's reasons that we got separation of powers. We have a Judeo-Christian heritage and that's the very reason why we have religious freedom. You know if you go into other countries with different faiths, they don't believe in religious freedom. The Judeo-Christian mindset is that a person's religion is between them and God and the government shouldn't interfere with that and so for that reason this country was founded I think with religious freedom for all faiths or no faiths at all.

End of video.

Video: Barry W. Lynn, Executive Director, Americans United for Separation of Church & State, Washington, DC

Video script:

In many ways, it was never accurate to call this a Christian nation, because the Fifth Congress of the United States even passed something called the Treaty of Tripoli in which it says in both English and Arabic, this was in no way founded as a Christian nation. This was to give other countries the idea that the United States was secular, not religious, and therefore, we were not going to have battles between Christianity and in the case of that treaty, the Muslim world.

End of video.

Video: Jason T. Kuznicki, Research Fellow, CATO Institute, Washington, DC

Video script:

Are we a Christian nation today? Are we a Christian nation today? Demographically the answer is yes. The United States is about 76% Christian according to a recent poll. By most measures of religiosity, Americans are more devout than other western countries. They tend to spend more time on their religion. It's perfectly possible to have a government that is run by Christians and that treats everyone fairly and that I think is the really important part and when people talk about having a Christian nation, I worry sometimes that what they mean is they would actually like to disfavor people who are perhaps agnostics or atheists or Jews or Muslims or other minority religions in the United States and that's in my opinion, that's contrary to what the founders wanted. The founders, some of whom were very devout, some of whom were not as devout, wanted a country where everyone could live at peace with regard to religion.

End of video.

Additional Resources

Websites

[Democracy in America](http://xroads.virginia.edu/~Hyper/DETOC/toc_indx.html)

http://xroads.virginia.edu/~Hyper/DETOC/toc_indx.html

This 1835 book by French scholar Alexis de Tocqueville is available online. For decades, political historians have valued de Tocqueville's unique perspective on the American democratic process in the 19th century. Visit the host directory for additional historical texts made available by the University of Virginia.

Books

The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism, by Andrew Bacevich.

A former soldier and professor of international affairs, Bacevich argues that the United States since the Cold War has demonstrated an overreliance on military power to assert its influence abroad.

No Apology: The Case for American Greatness, by Mitt Romney.

The former Massachusetts governor and US presidential candidate details his vision for America. A strong believer in American exceptionalism, Romney argues that the United States should be a leader in economic and geopolitical matters.