

Chapter 4 OUTLINE

I. Americans: A Contradictory People?

- Americans are, and always have been, more ethnically and religiously diverse than the citizens of other democracies.
- Yet American political views are very homogeneous. That is, Americans tend to agree on fundamentals and share basic assumptions about how a good society should be organized.

II. Social Diversity

- North America was settled by diverse peoples. British, Dutch, Swedes, French, and the Spanish all settled here. Coming from different Christian churches from Northern Europe, these groups often fought bitterly.
- In contemporary controversies about multiculturalism, both sides exaggerate the homogeneity of the American past, although for different reasons.

A. A Nation of Immigrants Then

- After ratification of the Constitution, the United States maintained the states' existing policy of free immigration. The more rapidly the territory could be populated, the more rapidly economic development would follow.
- By the mid-1800s, Irish immigration became a major political issue, primarily because they were mostly Catholic and poor.
- Immigration increased considerably in the 1860s and continued at a high rate until World War I. In the midwestern battleground states and much of the east, the Republicans had their base in the native Protestant communities, while the Democrats had their deepest roots in the immigrant Catholic communities.
- Ratification of the 14th Amendment gave citizenship to 4.6 million African-American men and women (constituting about the same proportion of the population as they do today).
- Another non-European group to assume a place in the United States was the Chinese. At first they were viewed positively, but then a virulent backlash set in.
- Beginning in the 1880s, the character of European immigration changed, as hundreds of thousands of people from southern and eastern Europe came to America. Many Americans found them threatening. Another reason for the anti-immigrant feeling was the threat American workers saw from cheap labor.
- A national literacy test was adopted in 1917 as a way of disenfranchising those immigrants viewed as most threatening.
- In the 1920s, laws were passed decreasing the number of immigrants and allowing those from mostly northern and western Europe. By 1930, the era of the open door had effectively ended. By this time more than 35 million people had left their homes to come to America.

B. A Nation of Immigrants Now

- In 1965, Congress abandoned the national-quotas system favoring northern Europeans, which resulted in a rapid increase in immigration from Latin America and the West Indies. In addition, there was a significant influx of Asians. In the 1980s, the absolute number of immigrants (about 9 million) was higher than in any previous decade.

C. Immigration as a Contemporary Issue

- Immigration again became an issue in the early 1990s. In 1994, California passed an initiative denying state services to illegal immigrants and their children. There are several economic reasons many Americans are concerned about immigration today.
- Unlike in times past, immigrants today are not entering a rapidly-expanding American economy. This makes domestic American workers nervous.
- States and cities vary as to how many of the burdens or benefits accompanying immigration they experience. The same can be said for the different levels of government.
- Due to the lifting of the restrictions on immigration in the 1965 law, a higher proportion of immigrants today are older. Thus, a higher proportion are not working or paying taxes but still in need of government services.
- In addition to these economic reasons, Americans also see immigration today as a threat to the American political culture.
- In 2003 the Department of Homeland Security's U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) started handling US immigration services and benefits, including citizenship, permanent residence, and non-immigrant applications, as well as asylum and refugee services.

III. Philosophical Unity

- The fundamental beliefs and values of Americans are usually dubbed individualistic, and the political culture is referred to as liberal. The word "liberal" as used here signifies, contrary to current usages of the word, skepticism of government or what is called classical liberalism.
- Classical liberalism, its starting point being the individual instead of the state, emphasized basic human rights, equality under the law, and limited government. It provided the philosophical foundation for the American constitutional order. In contrast, some historians think the influence of civic republicanism on America's founding deserves more attention.

A. American Individualism

- One strong belief shared by many Americans is that individuals are responsible for their own welfare.
- This belief is buttressed by two other notions: 1) Americans are suspicious of government power and dubious about government competence and 2) Americans believe that hard work and perseverance pay off. Even the poor tend to support these beliefs.

B. The Tension between Individualism and Equality

- Most Americans do not regard economic and social inequality as justification for government action.
- The explanation of this seeming inconsistency is that American political culture supports particular kinds of equality, specifically equality before the law which includes political equality.
- Americans do not insist on equality of condition, emphasizing instead equality of opportunity. In essence, this means they believe in equal opportunities to become unequal.

IV. One Nation, under God?

- Americans are more religious than people in other developed democracies. Although the institutions of church and state are constitutionally separated in the United States, there is not now, and never has been, a political wall between religion and politics.
- What explains the strength and persistence of religion in America? Several explanations have been advanced. First, there is the historical fact of the religious roots of the original settlers. Second, there is a great diversity of religion in America. Third, due to the lack of establishment, clergy must compete for members and that means greater attention is paid to the needs of members. Finally, could the liberal tradition, with its emphasis on the individual, actually breed a desire for things religious?

V. Why a Liberal Political Culture?

- Why has not ethnic, racial, and religious diversity in America eradicated the core beliefs and values of its political culture?

A. Traditional Explanations of American Individualism

- It has been argued by some that individualism in America took root and survived because of the lack of a feudal tradition in America. In addition, there was plenty of land making it easy for people to exercise their individualism. Others question this explanation given the fact that the frontier was closed by 1890 and given the great influx of immigrants who lacked the core value of individualism.
- The explanation may be political socialization. Newcomers and people born in America are taught the core beliefs, consciously or unconsciously.

B. Newer Explanations

- A recent explanation for the basic belief in individualism is that the governing institutions in America (separation of powers and checks and balances, for example) often result in gridlock. This has been true since the founding, so Americans have learned that you must rely on yourself rather than government to get things done.
- Another explanation is that the kinds of people who made the decision to immigrate to America were predisposed to believe in individualism. In other words, they did not become individualistic by living in America; they came to America because they were individualistic.