

## 4.8 Ideology and Policy Making

**Explain how U.S. political culture (e.g. values, attitudes, and beliefs) influences the formation, goals, and implementation of public policy over time.**

**Widely held political values shape the policy choices available in American politics.** The relationship between principles of freedom and individualism and the range of economic and domestic policies illustrate how political culture influences public policy formation. Seymour M. Lipset in his book *American Exceptionalism: A Double Edged Sword* (1996) pointed out that

*...The nation's ideology can be described in five words: liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism and laissez-faire. The revolutionary ideology which became the American Creed is liberalism in its eighteenth and nineteenth century meanings, as distinct from conservative Toryism, statist communitarianism, mercantilism and noblesse oblige dominant in monarchical, state-church-formed cultures.*

Our Creed imposes strict limits on policy makers. Though elites play a disproportionate role in the policy making process, they are held in check by the forces of our Creed. Hierarchical, authoritarian, collectivist and statist values known worldwide have found little refuge here. Therefore, American policy choices and actions tend to derive from the bottom up. Here the people rule. American *exceptionalism*, guided as some believe by Providence, serves as an underlying cultural leviathan dictating the scope and reach of public policy.

This tension between individual liberty and government efforts to promote stability and order is reflected in the most salient of our policy debates. For instance, debates over immigration have been greatly impacted by American cultural imperatives. American *exceptionalism* imposes an agreed conformity to certain "manners and customs." Despite being a nation of immigrants, a certain level of nativism has always been close to the surface in American political life. Immigrants challenge our perceived homogenous culture. Multi-cultural tensions, it is argued, provoke divisive tendencies. As a touchstone debate, immigration policy impacts families, neighborhoods, belief systems, work places and wages. Yet today's policy makers face significant immigrant questions with few answers. What to do about undocumented immigrants? Is boarder security a national security issue? How many short-term work visas and Green Cards should be issued each year? Comprehensive immigration reform, an attempt to answer these pressing questions, has proven to be allusive. Our President has chosen to address some of these issues through unilateral action, through the use of Executive Orders. State and local governments have chosen to act on their own. And interpreting and applying past practice to new and unprecedented institutional tensions have involved the Supreme Court.

Another issue that has been greatly influenced in our time by these cultural imperatives is government surveillance when fighting "the war on terror." Recent acts of terror, suicide bombings and domestic violence in the name of ideology rekindles the tension between individual freedom and the state's obligation to keep its people secure. Intrusive government intelligence gathering challenges basic civil liberties it is argued. Typically, individual rights carry the day in these debates. Yet police powers tend to expand as people confront their fears and insecurities. The fundamental question at our founding still presses our political consciousness – "we need a stronger central government but how strong?" Our political culture both facilitates and impedes the implementation of public policy.

Legislation and policy debates encouraging certain behaviors among citizens and businesses reflect a tension between belief that success depends on the individual versus a belief that government should promote fairness and inclusion. Early in our political history our government, it was assumed, held to a laissez-faire attitude. At best, governments served as a referee to private choices. This attitude may not have ever been quite true. History would suggest that a government made up of elites couldn't help itself but to pick winners and losers in policy debates. Privileged classes were certainly helped first. But progressive politics, first championed by local players, challenged the status quo. Common voices demanded more attention. Government was called upon to lend a hand to those who were in the greatest need. Beyond a focus on liberty and due process, institutions of government were given mandates to assure equal protection.

This progressivism can be seen as a natural evolution of early populist movements. Government now is seen as more than a referee. Government is an agent of social engineering. First seen in public policies that challenged corporate monopolies and economic inequalities, today progressive policies pervade all aspects of human life. Government policies regulate private business decisions, hiring practices and wage structures. Government has also taken on a greater responsibility for its most needy citizens. Yet debates continue to rage over just how to do this.

With respect to public welfare conservative voices appeared to win the debate with the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996. This "welfare reform" put limits and timetables on how much help governments would provide to our poorest citizens. Advocates of American *exceptionalism* argued that self-reliance was bedrock to our unique culture. Any policy that eroded such a value challenged our future strength as a nation. Alternatively, progressive voices have proposed the Dream Act, a policy that would grant conditional residency to certain undocumented immigrants. Culture warriors cry such a policy would challenge our fundamental commitment to the rule of law.

Of course, when American political culture is stretched and challenged by new and outside forces our debate grows more and more partisan. Less and less seems to get resolved. Culture wars have grown more and more common in this global environment. Multiculturalism is a battle cry for many in our political arena. This helps explain why the formation, goals and implementation of public policy "isn't beanbag."