

4.1 American Attitudes About Government and Politics

Explain the relationship between core beliefs of U.S. citizens and attitudes about the role of government.

Our revolutionary spirit, what some have called our “national character,” is rooted in ideas and practices that predate not only our own time but also the American war for independence. A government “of the people, by the people and for the people” is more than a Lincoln cliché. The first three words to our national constitution, “we the people,” is our Siren Song. Irresistibly, popular sovereignty defines our representative democracy. Even though we have always valued diversity here, we have ultimately agreed that our political systems have the goal to protect our freedoms, to promote the general welfare and to keep us safe. In this unit we will explore how these shared political beliefs, values and norms are preserved, processed and protected. We will discover that **citizens’ beliefs about government are shaped by the intersection of demographics, political culture, and dynamic social change.**

Political systems built on coercive force, all too common in history, have not been welcomed in America. Autochthonous to our government is a political system built upon the consent of the people. This cultural norm has dictated United States public policy for over two hundred years. The unique American political culture goes a long way to explain the successes of our political institutions. Political culture, as it has been commonly applied, is defined as “the system of empirical beliefs, expressive symbols, and values which defines the situation in which political action takes place.” Political culture, the core American beliefs, values and norms, provide the invisible glue that holds our system of government together.

Remarkably this common political culture evidenced itself quite early in our history. A French tourist, Alexis de Tocqueville, objectively published his observations after traveling here in 1831. His book, *American Democracy*, continues to shed light on America’s unique core beliefs, values and norms both then and now. Impressed by America’s “manners and customs” here are a few excerpts from his seminal book:

I sought for the greatness and genius of America in her commodious harbors and her ample rivers; in her fertile fields and boundless prairies; in her rich mines and her vast world commerce, and it was not there. Not until I went to the churches of America and heard her pulpits aflame with righteousness did I understand the secret of her genius and power. America is great because she is good and if America ever ceases to be good, America will cease to be great...

There is not a country in the world where man takes possession of the future more confidently, or feels with more pride that his intelligence makes him master of the universe, which he can reshape to his liking. It’s movement of mind that can only be compared to the one that brought about the discovery of the New World three centuries ago. In fact, one could say that America is being discovered a second time.

Town meetings are to liberty what primary schools are to science; they bring it within the people’s reach, they teach men how to use and how to enjoy it. A nation may establish a free government, but without municipal institutions it cannot have the spirit of liberty.

In 1831, Alexis de Tocqueville observed key cultural components that defined the relationship between citizen and state. Many political scientists, even today, try to document and systematize our shared political culture. This is important for many reasons. Perhaps George Will put it best when writing *Statecraft as Soul Craft* (1983):

Most politicians flee from political labels like 'liberal' and 'conservative' because the labels may circumscribe their political constituencies. But labels are reasonable; because a reasonable person's political judgments are not random. The familiar clusters of ideas manifest congruence and affinities that express political temperaments as well as political philosophies. Political ideas cluster; people cluster, politically.

And what political clusters still are evident today? For this we turn to the work of political scientist William C. Mitchell. Here is his list of American beliefs, values and norms. How well do they define your relationships with both government and your neighbor?

- *Political action should be minimized, and allocations of values should be dependent chiefly on private action.*
- *Political power is tangible and limited in quantity, and tends to be evil.*
- *To be legitimate, political authority and power must be rational and legal.*
- *The duties of citizenship are distinct from the more general duties of social life.*
- *Americans exhibit ambivalent attitudes toward compromise.*
- *Public office is a public trust, and political action should be taken only in the public interest.*
- *Politics tends to be thought of as a game.*
- *Political interpretations and assessments tend to be moralistic.*
- *Political problems can be resolved by intelligence, good will, and hard work.*

Although strict conformity to America's unique political culture as observed by de Tocqueville, or the common beliefs, values and norms listed by Mitchell can be challenged, we can all agree that certain commitments here transcend time and space. Yes, we can debate the degree to which we believe in individualism, equality of opportunity, free enterprise, the rule of law and the limits of government. Clearly our political outlook is impacted by differing demographics, dissimilar cultural backgrounds and differing exposure to dynamic social change. Yet "we the people" continue to advocate for our personal freedoms, for the continuation of the general welfare and for our collective security. Before there are any successful governing institutions, there are shared political beliefs.