

Study Outline

Chapter 4: American Political Culture

- I. Introduction
 - A. The American model of government both here and abroad
 - B. Tocqueville on American democracy
 - 1. Abundant and fertile soil for democracy to grow
 - 2. No feudal aristocracy; minimal taxes; few legal restraints
 - 3. Westward movement; vast territory provided opportunities
 - 4. Nation of small, independent farmers
 - 5. "Moral and intellectual characteristics," today called political culture
- II. Political Culture
 - A. Defined as a distinctive and patterned way of thinking about how political and economic life ought to be carried out (e.g. stronger American belief in political than in economic equality)
 - B. Elements of the American political system
 - 1. Liberty
 - 2. Democracy
 - 3. Equality
 - 4. Civic duty
 - C. Some questions about the U.S. political culture
 - 1. How do we know people share these beliefs?
Before polls, beliefs inferred from books, speeches, and so on
 - 2. How do we explain behavior inconsistent with beliefs?
Beliefs still important, source of change
 - 3. Why so much political conflict in U.S. history?
Conflict occurs even with beliefs in common
 - 4. Most consistent evidence of political culture
Use of terms Americanism, un-American
 - D. The economic system
 - 1. Americans support free enterprise but see limits on marketplace freedom
 - 2. Americans prefer equality of opportunity to equality of result; individualist view
 - 3. Americans have a shared commitment to economic individualism/self-reliance (see 1924 and 1977 polls)
- III. Comparing citizens of the United States with those of other nations
 - A. Political system
 - 1. Swedes: more deferential than participatory
 - a. Defer to government experts and specialists
 - b. Rarely challenge governmental decisions
 - c. Believe in what is best more than what people want
 - d. Value equality over liberty
 - e. Value harmony and observe obligations
 - 2. Japanese
 - a. Value good relations with colleagues
 - b. Emphasize group decisions and social harmony
 - c. Respect authority
 - 3. Americans
 - a. Tend to assert rights
 - b. Emphasize individualism, competition, equality, following rules, treating others fairly (compare with the Japanese)
 - 4. Cultural differences affect political and economic systems
 - 5. Danger of overgeneralizing: many diverse groups within a culture
 - 6. Almond and Verba: U.S. and British citizens in cross-national study
 - a. Stronger sense of civic duty, civic competence
 - b. Institutional confidence
 - c. Sense of patriotism
 - B. Economic system
 - 1. Swedes (contrasted with Americans): Verba and Orren
 - a. Equal pay and top limit on incomes
 - b. Less income inequality

- 2. Cultural differences make a difference in politics: private ownership in United States versus public ownership in European countries
 - C. The Civic Role of Religion
 - 1. Americans are highly religious compared with Europeans
 - 2. Recent trends in religiosity
 - 3. Putnam's "bowling alone" thesis
 - D. Religion and Politics
 - 1. Religious movements transformed American politics and fueled the break with England.
 - 2. Both liberals and conservatives use the pulpit to promote political change.
 - 3. Bush, Gore and public support for faith based approaches to social ills
- IV. The sources of political culture
- A. Historical roots
 - 1. Revolution essentially over liberty; preoccupied with asserting rights
 - 2. Adversarial culture the result of distrust of authority and a belief that human nature is depraved
 - 3. Federalist-Jeffersonian transition in 1800 legitimated the role of the opposition party; liberty and political change can coexist
 - B. Legal-sociological factors
 - 1. Widespread participation permitted by Constitution
 - 2. Absence of an established national religion
 - a. Religious diversity a source of cleavage
 - b. Absence of established religion has facilitated the absence of political orthodoxy
 - c. Puritan heritage (dominant one) stress on personal achievement
 - 1. Hard work
 - 2. Save money
 - 3. Obey secular law
 - 4. Do good
 - 5. Embrace "Protestant ethic"
 - d. Miniature political systems produced by churches' congregational organization
 - 3. Family instills the ways we think about world and politics
 - a. Great freedom of children
 - b. Equality among family members
 - c. Rights accorded each person
 - d. Varied interests considered
 - 4. Class consciousness absent
 - a. Most people consider themselves middle class
 - b. Message of Horatio Alger stories is still popular
 - C. The culture war
 - 1. Two cultural classes in America battle over values
 - 2. Culture war differs from political disputes in three ways:
 - a. Money is not at stake
 - b. Compromises are almost impossible
 - c. Conflict is more profound
 - 3. Culture conflict animated by deep differences in people's beliefs about private and public morality
 - 4. Culture war about what kind of country we ought to live in
 - 5. Two camps:
 - a. Orthodox: morality, with rules from God, more important than self-expression
 - b. Progressive: personal freedom, with rules based on circumstances, more important than tradition
 - 6. Orthodox associated with fundamentalist Protestants and progressives with mainline Protestants and those with no strong religious beliefs
 - 7. Culture war occurring within religious denominations
 - 8. Current culture war has special importance historically because of two changes:
 - a. More people consider themselves progressives than previously
 - b. Rise of technology makes culture war easier to wage
- V. Mistrust of government
- A. What the polls say

1. Since the 1950s, a steady decline in percentage who say they trust the government in Washington
 2. Increase in percentage who think public officials do not care about what we think
 3. Important qualifications and considerations:
 - a. Levels of trust rose briefly during the Reagan administration
 - b. Distrust of officials is not the same as distrust for our system of government
 - c. Americans remain more supportive of the country and its institutions than most Europeans
- B. Possible causes of apparent decline in confidence
1. Vietnam
 2. Watergate and Nixon's resignation
 3. Clinton's sex scandals and impeachment
 4. Levels of support may have been abnormally high in the 1950s
 - a. Aftermath of victory in World War II and possession of Atomic bomb
 - b. From Depression to currency that dominated international trade
 - c. Low expectations of Washington and little reason to be upset / disappointed
 5. 1960's and 1970's may have dramatically increased expectations of government
 6. Decline in patriotism (temporarily affected by the attacks of September 11)
- C. Necessary to view in context
1. Decline in confidence not spread to all institutions
 2. Decline in confidence also varies from group to group
 3. American's loss of support for leaders and particular policies does not mean loss of confidence in the political system or each other
- VI. Political efficacy
- A. Definition: citizen's capacity to understand and influence political events
 - B. Parts
 1. Internal efficacy
 - a. Ability to understand and influence events
 - b. About the same as in 1950s
 2. External efficacy
 - a. Belief that system will respond to citizens
 - b. Not shaped by particular events
 - c. Declined steadily through the 1960s and 1970s
 - C. Comparison: still much higher than Europeans'
 - D. Conclusion
 1. Some say Americans are more "alienated" from politics
 2. But current research has not easily established a relationship between trust in government and confidence in leaders and vote turnout
 3. Decline in trust and confidence may mean support for non-incumbents and third party candidates
- VII. Political tolerance
- A. Crucial to democratic politics
 1. Citizens must be reasonably tolerant
 2. But not necessarily perfectly tolerant
 - B. Levels of American political tolerance
 1. Most Americans assent in abstract
 2. But would deny rights in concrete cases
 - a. Liberals intolerant of extreme right
 - b. Conservatives intolerant of extreme left
 3. Most are willing to allow expression to most
 4. Americans have become more tolerant in recent decades
 - C. Question: How do very unpopular groups survive?
 1. Most people do not act on beliefs
 2. Usually no consensus on whom to persecute
 3. Courts are sufficiently insulated from public opinion to enforce protection
 - D. Conclusions
 1. Political liberty cannot be taken for granted
 2. No group should pretend it is always tolerant
 - a. Conservatives once targeted professors
 - b. Later, professors targeted conservatives

