CHAPTER 5

# Politics

When Juan Pablo, a graduate student in mechanical engineering from Monterrey, Mexico, first arrived in the United States, he was eager to discuss the recent U.S. presidential election with his new classmates. Juan Pablo had read many articles about the U.S. election in Mexican newspapers and had debated the relative merits of the candidates with friends and colleagues at home. Now he was interested in learning Americans' opinions about the election. In particular he had some questions about the electoral process. But Juan Pablo discovered that his American classmates had little to say about the election. Worse, they didn't seem to understand the American electoral process any better than he did and became visibly uncomfortable when he tried to engage them in debate. Juan Pablo came to the conclusion, as do many foreign visitors, that Americans do not care much about politics.

Juan Pablo would be surprised to learn that Americans are quite proud of their political system. They seem to revere their "Founding Fathers" (George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, etc.), their Constitution, and their Bill of Rights. Whether they are well informed about politics (most are not, and very many are quite apathetic about the topic) or whether they participate actively in political matters (most do not), most Americans believe their

political system has advantages that many other political systems lack. They believe their system protects their individual freedom, which is a value of supreme importance to them, and that it is, or can be, responsive to their wishes in ways other political systems cannot be.

Paradoxically, most Americans have a rather negative view of politics and politicians. The system might be good, but the people who operate within it might not be. As a group, politicians are generally seen as relatively unintelligent, talkative, egotistical, self-interested, and devious. Government employees, too, are suspect. Many Americans believe that the government has too many workers, with only a few who are diligent and productive enough to deserve the pay they receive. Paradoxically, again, Americans generally expect and usually receive competent service from government employees.

Perhaps because they fear that a government can become too strong and thereby endanger citizens' freedom, Americans tolerate a political system that seems utterly inefficient to many people from other countries. The American system was, indeed, originally established in such a way as to prevent it from taking quick, concerted action in any but the most extreme circumstances. Various governmental responsibilities are divided among the national, state, and local agencies, and a "separation of powers" exists among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government—at both the national and state levels. The basically "two-party system" is composed of two large and ideologically ambiguous parties competing for positions in the government.

This structure results in extreme decentralization that people from many other countries have difficulty understanding. This decentralization is most evident in the domestic realm, and somewhat less so in the international-affairs area. In both realms, though, the U.S. government has more internal impediments to action than do most other governments. American citizens tend to see that as an advantage, or at least as a price worth paying for the limits it puts on the government's ability to infringe on individual citizens' lives.

The administrative side of the government does not have the built-in "checks and balances" that keep the political side from acting decisively or, some might say, impetuously. Some administrative agencies are quite

efficient; others are less so. Among the least efficient, most observers would agree, is the part of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) that deals with immigration procedures. Unfortunately, the DHS is the one federal agency with which foreign visitors inevitably have dealings.

Americans feel quite free to criticize their political leaders. The president, senators, members of congress, governors, mayors, and others are subject to public criticism so harsh that international visitors are sometimes shocked and embarrassed by it—even if they agree with it. But while they themselves feel free to criticize, Americans usually do not welcome criticism from foreign visitors. "If you don't like it here, go back to where you came from," such visitors are sometimes told when they make negative comments about American politics (as well as other aspects of American life). Moreover, as mentioned in chapter 2, politics (like religion) is considered by many Americans to be a taboo topic, to be avoided in everyday conversation. Because political discussions may lead to arguments (and many Americans are uncomfortable with arguments), most Americans discuss politics only with close friends—and then only those with whom they share similar views.

In addition to pride in their system of government and a propensity to criticize their leaders, Americans have three other general ideas about politics that international visitors will want to understand: they believe firmly in what they call the "rule of law," they idealize compromise, and they conceive of politics as something separable from other aspects of life. After some discussion of each of these matters, this chapter closes with some ideas about the fundamental political divisions among Americans.

## THE RULE OF LAW

The idea behind the rule of law is that impartial laws, not human beings with their irrational and arbitrary tastes and judgments, should govern the formal aspects of social interaction. "We live under a rule of law, not of people," American teachers tell their students. The students accept the idea. They believe that "no person is above the law" and that laws apply equally to all people regardless of their wealth, personal connections, or station in

life. Their faith in the rule of law explains the conviction many Americans held, which many foreigners could not understand, that President Richard Nixon should be removed from office as a result of his behavior in connection with what was called the "Watergate Scandal." Nixon had broken the law and therefore should be punished, Americans believed, even if he was the president. Similarly, many Americans believed that both presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush should have been removed from office—Clinton for lying under oath about his affair with Monica Lewinsky, and Bush for perceived lying to the public and the congress about the nature of the threat allegedly facing America from Iraq's Saddam Hussein.

The belief in the rule of law goes beyond the realm of politics to other areas of life that are governed by formal rules and procedures. Getting a job with a government agency, for example, or getting a government grant for a research project entails following published procedures and demonstrating that one meets the published requirements. Theoretically, personal connections do not matter under the rule of law.

In practice, personal contacts, wealth, and social influence often do matter where laws and rules are concerned. What we have said here describes the ideal to which Americans subscribe. In reality, connections sometimes do help a person get a government job. Rich people sometimes go unpunished for illegal behavior that poor people would likely be punished for. But in general the rule of law prevails, at least in comparison with many other places in the world, and Americans are proud that it does.

## THE IDEAL OF COMPROMISE

A compromise is a settlement of differences in which both (or all) parties make some concessions to the other side. Both sides "give in" somewhat for the sake of reaching agreement. Americans are taught that compromise is a good thing. Mature people, in the general American view, resolve their differences through discussion and compromise. There are, of course, different ideas about what constitutes an acceptable level of compromise, but in general a political agreement that results from a compromise among contending parties is, by definition, good. One reason the U.S. Congress was

held in such low public esteem in the late 1900s and into the 2000s was its failure to reach compromises and take action on such major issues as global climate change, immigration, and the U.S. Senate's own rules.

Others may not share the American assumption that compromise is good. Compromise may be seen as abandoning one's principles—one's correct viewpoint. People who see compromise in that light are likely to take a negative view of those aspects of the American system that many Americans themselves consider so positive.

## POLITICS APART

Americans, perhaps more than people in any other country, believe that politics can be separated from other aspects of life. "Let's keep politics out of this," they will say, making the assumption that matters of official power do not enter into economic dealings, family structure, the efficiency of government services, and other aspects of life that do not entail the direct participation of politicians and government bodies. They will relate to other people without regard to their political opinions. They would generally rather not "talk politics." This approach seems quite naïve to most Latin Americans, Europeans, Middle Easterners, and Africans, who tend to suppose that "politics is everything, and everything is politics." Said Peruvian writer Mario Vargas Llosa, after being awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, "It's very difficult for a Latin American writer to avoid politics. Literature is an expression of life, and you cannot eradicate politics from life."

Given their assumption that you *can* eradicate politics from life and their image of politicians as less than worthy people, it is not surprising that the portion of American citizens who actively participate in politics is rather small. Many American citizens haven't even gone through the simple procedure of registering to vote. Once they have registered, they have the right to vote in national, state, and local elections, but Americans participate in elections at a lower rate than citizens of many other democratic countries.

Beyond voting, other means of participating in politics are open to Americans. Those who have relatively strong opinions or convictions on political matters may volunteer to work in a candidate's election campaign

or work on behalf of a political party. They may join organizations that seek to mobilize support for a particular candidate, law, or policy. They may even run for elective office themselves.

Americans who do not want to get involved in politics but who need some information or decision from a government body are likely to turn to their elected representatives for help. Senators and members of Congress employ staff whose job it is to respond to constituents (that is, voters or potential voters who live in their jurisdictions) who ask for assistance of some kind. Americans believe it is their right to enlist the aid of the politicians whom they have elected to represent them.

## FUNDAMENTAL FAULT LINES IN AMERICAN POLITICS

Just as there are many ways to address the topic of cultural differences, there are many ways of viewing political differences. In this section we will look briefly at two approaches that might help people from other countries understand whatever political issues are dominating Americans' attention at any given time. One approach looks at two possibly incompatible ways of framing political issues, the *constitutional* versus the *cultural*. The other approach has to do with differing views of the proper *role of government*.

### *Constitutional versus Cultural Framework*

In the summer of 2010, a Muslim organization proposed building a community center about two blocks from "ground zero," the site of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York City. The community center would include a prayer room, a gymnasium, and a number of other facilities. Whether through innocent oversimplification or intentional fearmongering, the media referred to the building as the "ground zero mosque," even though it was two blocks from ground zero and was not a mosque. The proposal set off a heated debate.

Some politicians and commentators argued that the principle of freedom of religion, enshrined in the Constitution, made it clear that the project should be approved. Opponents argued that building a "mosque" so near

the site of the attacks was insensitive to the feelings of the families of those killed on 9/11 and was unwisely and inappropriately supportive of Islam, some of whose adherents were responsible for the Trade Center attack.

In a *New York Times* column called "Islam in Two Americas," Ross Douthat sought to put the issue into a larger context:

> There's an America where it doesn't matter what language you speak, what god you worship, or how deep your New World roots run. An America where allegiance to the Constitution trumps ethnic differences, language barriers and religious divides. An America where the newest arrival to our shores is no less American than the ever-so-great granddaughter of the Pilgrims [the first Europeans to settle in what became the United States of America].
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> But there's another America as well, one that understands itself as a distinctive culture, rather than just a set of political propositions. This America speaks English, not Spanish or Chinese or Arabic. It looks back to a particular religious heritage: Protestantism originally, and then a Judeo-Christian consensus that accommodated Jews and Catholics as well. It draws its social norms from the mores of the Anglo-Saxon diaspora—and it expects new arrivals to assimilate themselves to these norms, and quickly.
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> These two understandings of America, one constitutional and one cultural, have been in tension throughout our history. (2010, A19)

### *Role of Government*

People in a particular country might share a set of values and assumptions that make up their culture, but they may have differing interpretations of what their shared values mean. Or they may rank their shared values differently. Americans, for example, generally value freedom, equality, and individualism. But does this mean they want the smallest possible role for government in their lives, so they can be free to pursue their individual aims? Or does it mean that the government ought to ensure that all citizens have a basic level of food, shelter, clothing, health, safety, and education, so they can be in a sound position to pursue their individual aims?

This question reflects a fundamental fault line in American politics: What is the proper role of the government? Visitors from other countries

can better understand American politics if they look beneath the rhetoric of politicians and commentators for their stance on the question of the government's proper role. A few contemporary examples:

- *Abortion.* Should individuals be free to decide for themselves whether to continue a pregnancy, or should the government, for the sake of the helpless unborn, restrict access to abortion?
- *Healthcare.* Should individuals pay for their own healthcare, probably via private health-insurance corporations, or should the government ensure that everyone has basic healthcare?
- *Taxation.* Should individuals be permitted to retain as much of their income and wealth as possible, to do with as they please, or should the government exact taxes to support activities that provide a general service or benefit?
- *Homeland security.* Should individual citizens be allowed to speak, act, and move about as they wish, free of government surveillance or other limitations and discouragements, or should the government monitor and restrict people's behavior in order to protect the public from anyone who might cause them harm?
- *Reviving the economy.* Should individuals, acting in a "free market," determine how productive assets are to be allocated, or should the government enact policies intended to influence the economy's structure, scope, and activities?
- *Gun control.* Should individual citizens have an unencumbered right to own and carry firearms, or should the government, in the interest of public safety, enact some controls on gun ownership?
- *The role of corporations.* Should corporations be allowed to act according only to the perceived interest of their stockholders and to the "dictates of the free market," or should the government exert some controls over them in the name of the "public interest?"

Generally, those Americans who favor a smaller role for the government are labeled "conservatives" while those favoring a larger and more active government are labeled "liberals" or "progressives." The more conservative conservatives may be labeled "right-wing," while the more liberal liberals may be called "left-wing." Visitors ought not to make too much of these

labels, though, because each covers a wide range of philosophical foundations and policy recommendations. The labels are so loose that some commentators consider them useless.

The Republican Party is usually considered the more conservative of America's two large political parties, while the Democratic Party is considered more liberal. Both parties lack the level of philosophical and policy agreement found in political parties in many other countries.

Whatever their label, politicians in the United States consistently invoke the values their prospective audiences are presumed to share—individualism, freedom (and free enterprise), equality, privacy, material achievement, and so on.

In sum, Americans tend to embody what many consider a curious combination of admiration for their political system in general and disdain for its particular operations. They criticize their leaders, but do not want foreigners to do so. They strongly believe in the value of the rule of law and of compromise. They compartmentalize politics as a separable aspect of life, one they can choose to ignore. Their low level of participation in politics, not to mention their general lack of interest in political affairs, seems inexplicable if not irresponsible to many visitors from abroad. Those who do take stands on political issues generally divide between those who are skeptical of government and those who believe the government can realize valuable goals.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL VISITORS

International visitors who wish to learn more about American politics should approach the topic carefully, keeping in mind that Americans are often uncomfortable discussing political issues.

To be in a position to discuss politics with locals, it's necessary to be informed about contemporary issues and personalities. Ways to be informed include reading the local newspaper, perhaps a national newspaper such as *The New York Times*, and newsmagazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek*. These and most other publications have websites that, at least at the time of this writing, can be accessed for free.

Many blogs offer news and commentary on political matters. When you encounter a U.S. American who seems interested in political matters, ask her what sources of information, including blogs, she relies on. Or just surf the Internet until you find sites that interest you.

Learn the names of key political figures in your area—the mayor and other top local officials, the state's governor, your area's representative at the statehouse and in Washington, D.C.

Consider attending lectures and debates on current issues, which are often sponsored by colleges, universities, and student organizations. There you are more likely to encounter Americans who have strong political opinions and who are willing to share their ideas.

If you are deeply interested in politics, you can attend political-party meetings in your area, or other meetings devoted to airing political issues.