American Political Culture
Political Culture—a set of widely shared beliefs, values, and norms concerning how political and economic life ought to be carried out

Fundamental assumptions about how political process should operate
Values that are distinctly American

1. Liberty (Freedom) ➞ Freedom to do what you want?
2. Equality ➞ That all men are created equal
3. Democracy ➞ Government is accountable
4. Civic Duty ➞ Do your part
5. Individual Responsibility
American Political Values

1. Liberty—preoccupied with our rights
   - Freedom to do as we please within certain limits
   - John Locke and Thomas Jefferson – “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness…”

2. Equality—equal vote and equal chance to succeed
   - T.J. – “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal…”
   - Equality before the Law
   - Equality of Opportunity vs. Equality of Results
The Dilemmas of Equality

- **Legal equality** -- where every citizen is supposed to have equal rights before the law, such as right to a speedy trial.

- **Political equality** – throughout American history with constitutional amendments guaranteeing the vote for ex-slaves in 1868, women in 1920, and other voting rights acts.
The Dilemmas of Equality

- **Equality of opportunity** is a widely-shared value that all have had an equal opportunity to become educated, make effort, take risks, invest, use talents, or just be lucky.
  - To the extent race, gender, religion, ethnicity, or other factors make equality of opportunity different for different classes of citizens, Americans feel the value of equality of opportunity is violated.
    - *Affirmative action* attempts to remedy the effects of past bias

- **Equality of results** is whether the government should take action to reduce income and other material inequalities -- socialism
American Political Values

3. Individualism—importance and dignity of the individual
   -- “Rugged Individualism” – barring some disability, individuals are responsible for their own actions and well-being
   - The Economic System—“meritocracy”
     ▪ We are more willing to tolerate economic inequality than political inequality
   - Economic Individualism—connections to politics
     ▪ people are willing to support the “needy” (disabled, elderly, etc.) but not those capable of taking care of themselves
     ▪ connection to welfare/ civil rights (affirmative action)
     ▪ Social Security / Medicare
American Political Values

4. Democracy—government officials should be accountable to the people
   – Consent of the governed
   – Majority rule with the protection of the minority’s rights as well
   – Limited Government

5. Civic Duty—people ought to take community affairs seriously and help out when possible (Voting, Party Activity, Public Opinion, Interest Groups, Direct Action)
3 Questions???

- How do we know that the American people share these beliefs?
- If these values are important to Americans, how can we explain the existence in our society of behavior that is obviously inconsistent with them?
- If there is agreement among Americans on certain political values, why has there been so much political conflict in our history?
Sources of American Political Culture

1. **History**
   - American Revolution
     - preoccupation with natural rights and distrust of authority
     - Break from the King of England, No Titles, 3 Branches of Government, No Central religion, etc.
   - Constitution and Federalism
     - Federalist (Hamilton)-Jeffersonian Transition in 1800
       - Legitimized the role of the opposition party
       - Liberty and political change can coexist

2. **Religious beliefs** --- an established national tradition but not an official religion (80% of Americans consider themselves religious)
   - Protestant (Puritan) Heritage (Protestant Work Ethic)
     - Work hard
     - Save money
     - Obey secular laws
     - Do good deeds
Sources of American Political Culture

3. Transmitted through the **FAMILY**
   - Political Socialization ➔ Where we feel the learning about what is good and right takes place. MORALS.

4. **Class consciousness** is absent
   - Thinking of yourself in one class with separate interests to those of another **opposition** class
   - most people consider themselves middle class
     - Example: Great Depression --- “All in it together”
   - even the unemployed do not oppose management
   - Horatio Alger—rags to riches
5. **Tolerance** --- Democracy depends on citizens being reasonably tolerant of the opinions and actions of others

- Most Americans claim to be fairly tolerant of others

**More complex than what is on the surface**

- Overwhelming majority agree with freedom of speech, religion, right to petition
- We are willing to allow people we disagree with to speak and act how they please
- Most people dislike one or another group strongly enough to deny it certain political rights, although many are unwilling to act on those beliefs
  - Mexicans – illegal immigration
  - Arabs – general assumption of terrorism
Do we really mistrust our government?

6. **Suspicion of Power** --- Our mistrust of government is not necessarily in the system itself but rather the leaders and their policies

- Mistrust in government may not be unusual; a common idea
  - Actually our Constitution and current system was founded on the belief that government and its leaders are corrupt
    - Separation of Powers
    - Checks and Balances
    - Bill of Rights
Attitude Towards Government

- Poor Attitude towards government
  - Evidence has increased since the mid-1960s
  - Polls showed people believe
    - “Quite a few” crooks in government
    - Government run by a “few big interests”
    - “Lots” of tax money is wasted
    - Government only does what is “right” “some of the time”

- Causes
  - Watergate
  - Vietnam
  - Monica Lewinsky
  - 2000 Presidential Election
  - Hurricane Katrina
  - Middle East Wars

- Voter turnout
  - Low and declining & abysmal at local and non-Presidential years
Principles in a US Democracy

- **CULTURE WAR**

- Orthodox Vs. Progressive
  - Orthodox --- moral issues should out-weigh self-expression; morality comes from God or laws of nature.
  - Progressive --- personal freedom is more important than traditional moral values.

* Our society is constantly changing, therefore we should adapt our stances on social issues.
Why is there so much cultural conflict in American politics?
  - locked in a war over values.

Animated by people’s deep differences regarding beliefs about private and public morality

Different from other political disputes
  - money is not at stake
  - compromises are almost impossible
  - deep and divisive differences
  - issues of morality