

UNIT II: POLITICAL BELIEFS AND BEHAVIORS

Every country has a **political culture** - a set of widely shared beliefs, values, and norms concerning the ways that political and economic life ought to be carried out. The political culture defines the relationship of citizens to government, to one another, and to the economy. A good understanding of a country's political culture can help you make sense of the way a country's government is set up, as well as the political decisions its leaders make.

The American political culture may share beliefs, values, and norms, with those of other countries, but the sum and configuration of each political culture is unique. A **conflictual political culture** is one in which different groups (or subcultures) clash with opposing beliefs and values; a **consensual political culture** experiences less conflict. No matter how broadly the consensus is held, any culture contains values that overlap and conflict; the American political culture is no exception. Although many conflicts exist within the political system in the United States, American political culture is generally consensual because we have a broad based of shared political values. Most of our conflicts occur because we disagree on how these values should be implemented, not on the basic beliefs themselves.

SHARED VALUES

The values of the American political culture are grounded in the eighteenth century Enlightenment philosophy that so heavily influenced the founders. Over the years other values have been added, some supporting the original ones, some conflicting. American political beliefs and behaviors today reflect an accumulation of these values throughout United States history.

CORE VALUES

The following values have shaped the political culture since the founding of the country:

- **Liberty** - The value of liberty probably was the most important inspiration to the American Revolution, and it remains a core value today. Liberty was one of the natural rights first cited by John Locke and later by Thomas Jefferson: ... "that among these [rights] are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.."
- **Equality** - Again, Thomas Jefferson refers to this basic value in the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal.." Although most Americans don't believe that everyone is equal in every sense of the word, the basic beliefs in equality of opportunity and equal treatment before the law have influenced the political system greatly.
- **Individualism** - The values of equality and liberty are complemented by a commitment to the importance and dignity of the individual. Under our system of government, individuals have both rights and responsibilities. "**Rugged individualism**" is a reflection of this value: the belief that individuals are responsible for their own well-being and that the strength of our system lies in the ability of individuals to be left alone to compete for success. This value is associated with the a belief in the "common sense" of ordinary people and their ability to not only take care of themselves, but choose their government leaders as well.
- **Democracy** - Most Americans believe that government should be based on the consent of the governed, or that legitimacy ultimately lies in the hands of the people. We also believe in majority rule, but our emphasis on liberty and individualism causes us to believe that the rights of the minority should be protected as well.
- **Rule of law/Civic Duty** - The belief that government is based on a body of law applied equally, impartially, and justly is central to American political culture. Although critics today observe that sense of community is not as strong in modern day, most Americans believe that they *ought to* be involved in local affairs and help out when they can.

Some international studies show that Americans by comparison tend to be more nationalistic, optimistic, and idealistic than people in other countries, although the scope of these studies is limited.

POLITICAL IDEOLOGY: LIBERALS AND CONSERVATIVES

A **political ideology** is a coherent set of values and beliefs about public policy. In U.S. politics, ideologies generally are thought to fall into two opposite camps: liberal and conservative. While there are general guidelines for determining the nature of liberalism and conservatism, the differences between the two are not always obvious. Following and describing ideologies is also complicated by the fact that they change over time, so that being conservative or liberal today is not necessarily the same as it was a few years ago.

How Ideological are American Citizens?

The classic study of the 1950s, *The American Voter*, investigated the ideological sophistication of the American electorate. The authors created four classifications of voters:

- **ideologues** - 12 % of the people connected their opinions and beliefs to policy positions by candidates and parties. In other words, only 12% of the American voting populations voted along primarily ideological lines.
- **group benefits voters** - 42% of the people voted for parties based on which one they thought would benefit groups they belonged to or supported. ("Democrats are more supportive of labor union members like me.")
- **nature of the times voters** - 24% of the people linked good times or bad times (usually based on economics) to one political party or the other and vote accordingly. ("The Republicans can get us out of this recession.")
- **no issue content** - 22% of the people could give no issue-based or ideological reasons for voting for a party or a candidate. ("_____ is better looking than the other candidate.")

Follow up studies conducted through 1988 reveal some variation in percentages among the groups, with ideologues faring somewhat better than they did in the 50s, but they are still a relatively small group (18% in 1988).

Liberalism vs. Conservatism

The terms **liberal** and **conservative** are confusing partly because their meaning has changed over the course of American history. In early American history, liberals disapproved of a strong central government, believing that it got in the way of ordinary people reaching their ambitions. They saw the government as a friend of business and the political elite. Conservatives, on the other hand, believed that government was best left to political elites, although they did not deny the rights of individual voters to contribute to the political system.

That trend reversed during the 1930s with Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal big government programs to help ordinary people get back on their feet during the Great Depression. During that era, Democrats began to see the government as a friend to the little people one that provided much needed support during bad economic times. Republicans came to support the belief in rugged individualism: the responsibility of all people to take care of themselves. Although Democrats are not always liberal and Republicans are not always conservative, liberals since Roosevelt have generally supported a larger, more active role for the central government than conservatives have. However, some observers believe that this distinction between liberals and conservatives may be changing in the early 20th century. Conservative President George W. Bush is often seen as supportive of big government, a fact that more traditional conservatives have criticized.

Even though the terms liberal and conservative are more meaningful for political activists than they are for the rank-and-file voter, the concepts are roughly, if inconsistently, understood by most Americans.

The following table summarizes some of the political beliefs likely to be preferred by liberals and conservatives:

ISSUE	LIBERALS	CONSERVATIVES
Health Care	Health Care should be more widely available to ordinary people and not necessarily tied to work Tendency to support a national health care system	Health care is best handled by private insurance companies and are most logically tied to work place benefits.
Crime	Cure the economic and social reasons for crime.	Stop coddling criminals and punish them for their crimes.
Business Regulation	Government should regulate businesses in the public interest	Businesses should be allowed to operate under free market conditions
Military Spending	Spend less.	Spend more.
Taxes	The rich should be taxed more; the government is responsible for reducing economic inequality.	Taxes should be kept low.
Welfare State	The government is responsible for helping the poor find employment and relieving their misery.	People are responsible for their own well-being; welfare takes away the incentive to take care of themselves

Civil rights	Support for pro-active civil rights government policies	Limited government role in promoting social equality
Abortion	Pro-choice	Pro-life
Religion	Clear separation of church and state	Support for faith-based political initiatives

Individuals may have political beliefs that are a combination of liberalism and conservatism. Most commonly they may divide their opinions about economic and social issues. For example, an economically liberal, socially conservative person might believe in government support for health and welfare, but may oppose gay rights and/or equal opportunity programs for ethnic/racial minorities.

CHANGING AMERICAN VALUES

The firmly entrenched values of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were altered radically by the Industrial Revolution of the late 1800s. The most profound economic change was the increase in the inequality in the distribution of wealth and income. By the end of the century great wealth lay in the hands of a few people - the entrepreneurs or "robber barons." In a sense, the economic development brought out some inherent conflicts between the core values already established.

⟨ **Capitalism** - Before the late 1800s, most personal wealth was based on land ownership. The commitment to **capitalism** - wealth based on money and other capital goods - became an additional shared political value during the Industrial Revolution, one that complements individualism and freedom.

⟨ **Free enterprise** - During this same time period, American beliefs in freedom and individuals came to embrace **free enterprise** - economic competition without restraint from government.

These values reinforced the older emphasis on individualism. Just as early Americans had sought their fortune by claiming and farming new land by their own individual efforts, entrepreneurs of the late 19th century were flexing their muscles in the new industrial economy. However, the new commitment conflicted with the old value of equality, and tensions resulted. For example, robber barons were accused of exploiting workers and limiting competition in order to get ahead themselves, not only challenging equality, but other people's liberty as well. Monopolies also caused many to question equality of opportunity. The era illustrated inherent conflicts among the core values that had been in place for more than a century. The resolution was to legislate new government regulations to ensure fair treatment in the marketplace, and another belief was added to our political culture: government responsibility for the general welfare.

VALUE CHANGES DURING THE 1930s

Although the Preamble to the Constitution states that "**promotion of the General Welfare**" is a major purpose of government, the meaning of that value was transformed during the 1930s. The Great Depression brought about the near-collapse of capitalism, and the New Deal was an affirmation of the government's responsibility for the welfare of its people. In Roosevelt's 1944 inaugural address, he outlined a "**Second Bill of Rights**" that reflected his firm commitment to "economic security and independence." For example, he asserted everyone's rights to a useful job, food, clothing, a decent home, adequate medical care, and the right to a good education. These beliefs played a major role in the creation of the civil rights and welfare legislation of the 1960s, and as recently as the early 1990s, Clinton referred to Roosevelt's Second Bill of Rights when he said, "Health care is a basic right all should have." The defeat of his health care plan indicates that Americans don't always agree on the meaning of this value. Again, the movement created tension over the value of individualism, or the individual's responsibility to take care of himself. The government's responsibility for the general welfare became a major issue of the 2000 election campaign as candidates George W. Bush and Al Gore debated the merits of a government-sponsored prescription plan for the elderly, and again in 2004, as President Bush supported privatization of Social Security programs, and challenger John Kerry did not.

POLITICAL TOLERANCE

Another American value that is easily misunderstood is **political tolerance**. Democracy depends on citizens being reasonably tolerant of the opinions and actions of others, and most Americans believe themselves to be fairly tolerant. Studies show that political tolerance is much more complex a value than it appears on the surface. Among their findings are:

- < The overwhelming majority of Americans agree with freedom of speech, religion, right to petition - at least in the abstract.
- < People are not as politically tolerant as they proclaim themselves to be.
- < Americans are willing to allow many people with whom they disagree to do a great deal politically.
- < Americans have become more tolerant over the last few decades.
- < Most people dislike one or another group strongly enough to deny it certain political rights, although people are not always inclined to act on their beliefs. As a general rule, people are willing to deny rights to people on the opposite end of the political spectrum.

PUBLIC OPINION

Public opinion is the distribution of individual attitudes toward a particular issue, candidate, or political institution. Although the definition is simple enough, public opinion encompasses the attitudes of millions of diverse people from many racial, ethnic, age, and regional groups. As a result, the study of American public opinion is especially complex, but also very important. For American government to operate democratically, the opinions of the American public must reach and become an integral part of the political process.

FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE POLITICAL ATTITUDES

When pollsters divide people into groups before they conduct random samples, they are acknowledging a well-proven fact: group identifications often influence political attitudes. Political attitudes are shaped by **political socialization**, a lifelong process through which an individual acquires opinions through contact with family, friends, coworkers, and other group associations. Today the media also plays a major role in political socialization, with political news and opinions widely available on TV, radio, and the internet. Political attitudes in turn determine how individuals participate, who they vote for, and what political parties they support. Many factors – including family, gender, religion, education, social class, race and ethnicity, and region – all contribute to American political attitudes and behavior.

FAMILY

The family is probably the most important source of political socialization, and so it plays a major role in shaping political attitudes, particularly of party identification. Polls show that the majority of young people identify with their parents' political party. The process begins early in life (by the age of ten or eleven), and even though individuals generally become more independent as they grow older, the correlation between adult party identification and the parents' party is still very high. A parallel trend, however, is a tendency for this correlation to be lower than it has in the past. This trend may be related to another trend: the growing number of voters who call themselves "independents" rather than Democrats or Republicans.

Logically, the more politically active your family, the more likely you are to hold the same beliefs. For example, most members of the extended Kennedy family are Democrats, and most Bush family members are Republicans. The relationship weaker on specific issues – like gun control, school prayer, and government welfare programs – but still holds strong for overall political views and identifications.

GENDER

A person's gender also influences political views. For example, more women consider sexual harassment in the workplace to be a serious problem than do men, and more men than women tend to support military actions and spending in foreign affairs.

Party identification is also affected by gender, but the relationship has shifted through the years. In the 1920s when women first began to vote, they were more likely to support the Republican Party than were men. Some experts explain this correlation by pointing out that the Republicans tended to be more the party of "hearth and home" in the 20s. Whatever the explanation, the tendency for women to vote for Republicans continued through the 1930s. Although most women supported the Democrat Franklin Roosevelt over his Republican opponents, the percentage of women supporters was lower than the percentage of men who supported Roosevelt. The trend held until the late 1960s, when the correlation reversed. Since that time women have been more likely than men to vote for Democrats. This gender gap has been explained by the advent of the modern women's rights movement and the Democrats' tendency to support points of view women support: equal opportunity for women, abortion rights, and welfare programs. On the other hand, some experts argue that Republicans are more concerned about defense issues, and thus they attract more men to their party. In the election of 2004, the gender gap appeared to be closing, with Republican George W. Bush garnering about 48% of all women's votes. However, Bush's support among men was significantly higher.

A more recent gender-related issue has to do with male vs. female support for women political candidates. Although common sense may tell us that women would be more likely to support women candidates, the research does not show a clear correlation. One problem is that relatively few women run for political office. Although their numbers have increased in recent elections, more women candidates run as Democrats than as Republicans, so it is difficult to know if the candidate's gender alone affects voting patterns of women and men.

MARRIED VS. UNMARRIED

Pollster John Zogby has pointed out that the gender gap (especially as evidenced in the 2004 presidential election) is not nearly so significant as the gap between married and unmarried voters. He found that on most issues single and married voters were often 25-30 points different, with singles more likely to vote for Democratic candidates, and married voters more likely to support Republicans.

RELIGION

An individual's religion is a factor in determining his or her political attitudes. Although the relationships are not as strong as they once were, these patterns still hold:

- < Protestants are more conservative on economic matters (such as minimum wage and taxes) than are Catholics and Jews.
- < Jews tend to be more liberal on both economic and social issues (such as civil liberties and rights) than are Catholics or Protestants.
- < Catholics tend to be more liberal on economic issues than they are on social issues.

Some special research on fundamentalist Christians indicates that they tend to support more conservative candidates for public office, and that they are more likely to contribute to the Republican Party than to the Democratic Party. This more conservative tendency is stronger for attitudes about social issues (such as abortion, civil rights for minorities, and women's rights), than it is for foreign affairs and economic issues (such as government services and job guarantees).

In recent elections, a distinction has emerged between the political attitudes of those that attend religious services regularly and those that donate. The trend was particularly apparent in the election of 2004, when churchgoers were more likely to vote for Republicans, and non-churchgoers were more likely to support Democrats.

EDUCATION

A person's level of education also affects political attitudes, but the evidence provides conflicting results. In general, the higher the individual's educational level, the more likely they are to hold conservative political points of view. However, many studies show that college education often influences an individual to have more liberal social and economic attitudes than they had before they started college. These studies show that the longer students stay in college and the more prestigious the institution they attend, the more liberal they become. The reasons for the correlation are unclear, but some experts believe that the liberal attitudes of professors may influence students. Others believe that the differences lie not in the schooling itself, but in the characteristics of people who attend college vs. those that don't.

SOCIAL CLASS

A number of years ago, the relationship between social class and political attitudes was clear: the higher the social class, the more conservative the individual, and the more likely he or she was to belong to the Republican party. Today, that relationship is much less clear, perhaps partly because of the correlation cited above between college education and liberalism. Even though the broad affiliations between blue-collar workers and the Democratic Party and businessmen and the Republican Party still have some credibility, those relationships are much weaker than they once were.

RACE AND ETHNICITY

Much research has focused on the relationship between an individual's race and ethnicity and his or her political attitudes. The oldest and largest numbers of studies focus on black Americans, who tend to identify with the Democratic Party and are still the most consistently liberal group within that party. In recent presidential elections, blacks have voted in overwhelming numbers (close to 90%) for the Democratic candidate.

Much less research has been conducted with Hispanic Americans, but preliminary results indicate that they too tend to be more liberal than the majority, with a tendency to affiliate with the Democratic Party. However, the correlation appears to be weaker than that of black Americans.

A very limited amount of research among Asian Americans indicates that they are more conservative than blacks or Hispanics, although attitudes of the various nationalities of Asians fluctuate widely. For example, preliminary research indicates that Korean Americans are more liberal than are Japanese Americans. Overall, more Asian Americans voted in the 2000 presidential election for Democrat Al Gore than for Republican George W. Bush, so the influence of Asian ethnicity on political attitudes is still not clear.

GEOGRAPHIC REGION

As a general rule, people on either coast tend to be more liberal than those in the middle of the country. However, there are many problems in defining that tendency because the rule is overbroad. For example, many Californians are very conservative, as are a number of New Englanders. However, part of the reason for the trend is probably an urban/rural differentiation, with coastal cities inhabited by minorities, recent immigrants, and members of labor unions. Cities in the rust belt of the Great Lakes region also tend to vote Democratic, partly because they have strong labor constituencies.

The Southeast presents some special problems with applying the rule, partly because party affiliations of Southerners have been changing over the past fifty years or so. Since the 1950s, many southerners have broken their traditional ties with the Democratic Party. From the time of Reconstruction until the 1950s, the **Solid South** always voted Democratic. Virtually all representatives, senators, governors, and local officials in the South belonged to the Democratic Party. Since the 1950s, more and more political leaders have affiliated with the Republicans, so that today, in most Southern states, both parties have viable contenders for public office. Some experts explain this phenomenon by pointing out that many southerners disagreed with the Democratic Party's support for the black civil rights movement starting in the 1950s, with the result that many white southerners changed their party affiliation.

Although some research indicates that white southerners tend to be less liberal than others on social issues, such as aid to minorities, legalizing marijuana, and rights of those accused of crimes, southern attitudes on economic issues (government services, job guarantees, social security) are very similar to those from other regions.

Although there is some evidence that southerners are more conservative than they were fifty years ago, political views today of white southerners are less distinct from those in other regions than they used to be.

MEASURING PUBLIC OPINION

The measurement of public opinion is a complex process that involves careful interviewing procedures and question wording. To complicate the task further, people are often not well informed about the issues, and may comment on topics they know little about. Public opinion polls must be constructed and executed carefully in order to accurately reflect the attitudes of the American public.

Public opinion polling is a relatively new science, first developed by **George Gallup**, who did some polling for his mother-in-law, a candidate for secretary of state in Iowa in 1932. Gallup founded a firm that spread from its headquarters in Princeton, New Jersey throughout the democratic world. Today, other well-known private firms conduct polls, and big television networks, magazines and newspapers, such as CNN, *Time*, and *The New York Times*, conduct their own polls. Pollsters are also hired by political candidates to determine their popularity, and the results of their polls often shape the direction of political campaigns. The national government even sponsors opinion polls of its own.

Polls generally start when someone wants a political question answered. For example, a candidate running for the House of Representatives may wonder, What do people in the district need? or How strong a candidate do they think I am? Or a newspaper may want to know, How do people in this country feel about the threats of bioterrorism? The candidate or publisher may commission a poll, and a reporter may base a story on the research findings. The pollsters then follow several important principles in gathering accurate statistics:

- **Representative sample** -The sample of those interviewed must be representative of the entire population. Every citizen cannot be polled regarding his or her opinion on a whole range of issues, but those selected must allow the pollster to make accurate assessments of public opinion. The most common technique employed is **random sampling**, which gives everyone in the population an equal probability of being selected. Most national surveys sample between a thousand and fifteen hundred persons. The pollster most commonly makes a list of groups, using criteria such as region, age, ethnic and racial groups, gender, and religion. From these groups, people are selected randomly for interviews. The disastrous Literary Digest Poll of 1936 provides a famous example of what can happen if the random sampling principle is ignored. That poll predicted that Alf Landon would beat Franklin Roosevelt by a landslide, but the results were the opposite. The Digest sample was biased because it

was based on telephone books and club membership lists at a time when only well-to-do people had phones.

- **Respondent's knowledge** - People must have some knowledge of the issues they are asked about. If the issue is complex (such as American policy toward Afghanistan), people should be allowed to say "I don't know, or I haven't thought about it much." Still, people are often reluctant to admit a lack of knowledge about political issues, so pollsters always must allow for the fact that people often pretend to know things that they don't.
- **Careful and objective wording** - The structure and wording of the question is very important in obtaining an accurate response. "Loaded" or emotional words should not be used, and the pollster must not indicate what the "right" answer is. For example, consider a question like, "How much do you dislike leaders of Middle Eastern countries?" You could hardly expect an accurate answer. The categories of answers also determine the results of the poll. A yes or no question, such as, "Do you think the president is doing a good job?" will give very different results than a question that gives the interviewee a chance to rank the president's performance (excellent, very good, good, average, poor, very poor).
- **Cost efficiency v. accuracy**- Almost all polls have a budget, but accuracy should not suffer as a result. For example, a **straw poll** that asks television viewers to call in their opinions is not very expensive, but it generally is not very accurate either. The people that call in usually feel very strong about the issue. And some of them call in more than once.
- **Variations between samples** - The same poll conducted with a different random sample almost certainly will produce slightly different results. These slight variations are known as **sampling errors**. A typical poll of about fifteen hundred usually has a sampling error of + or - 3 percent. This means that 95% of the time the poll results are within 3 percentage points of what the entire population thinks. If 60% of the population supports a candidate for office, in actuality, 57-63% of the population supports him or her. Usually, the larger the sample in proportion to the population, the smaller the sampling error.

MISTRUST OF THE GOVERNMENT

A recent trend in changing American political values and beliefs is that of growing **mistrust of the government**. Although the trust reflected in the 1950s and early 1960s may have been artificially high, trust in government and its officials has declined significantly since the mid-1960s. Many scholars blamed the Vietnam War and Watergate for the initial, dramatic drops, but the trend is persistent into the early 21st century, with Americans in record numbers expressing disgust with politics and politicians.

Accompanying the mistrust of government has been a drop in **political efficacy**, a citizen's capacity to understand and influence political events. Political efficacy has two parts:

< **Internal efficacy** - the ability to understand and take part in political affairs

< **External efficacy** - the belief of the individual that government will respond to his or her personal needs or beliefs.

Most studies find little difference over the last half-century in the levels of internal efficacy in the United States. However, there has been a big change in external efficacy, with most Americans believing that the government is not very responsive to the electorate. The levels dropped steadily during the 1960s and 70s, with many political scientists blaming the Vietnam War and Watergate for the growing belief that government officials operate without much concern for beliefs and concerns of ordinary people. The pattern continues until today, and may be one reason that incumbent presidents have had a difficult time getting reelected in recent years.

Americans seem to have come to the conclusion that government is too big and pervasive to be sensitive to individual citizens. However, international studies show that Americans feel significantly higher levels of political efficacy than do citizens of many European nations. Americans are less likely to vote than most Europeans, but they are more likely to sign petitions, work to solve community problems, and regularly discuss politics.

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Political participation encompasses the various activities that citizens employ in their efforts to influence policy making and the selection of leaders. People participate in politics in many ways. They may write their representative or senator, or work for a candidate or political party. Or they can make presentations to their local school board or city council, or call the police to complain about the neighbor's dog. Partly because of our

federalist system, people have many opportunities to participate in our democracy on national, state, and local levels. Some forms of participation are more common than others and some citizens participate more than others. Americans in general are comparatively active in politics, but the United States is notorious among modern democracies for its low voter turnout rates, although the rates went up significantly in the election of 2004. However, the turnout for the previous two U.S. presidential elections was just about 50%. By contrast, most western democracies in Europe have vote rates well above 70%.

TYPES OF PARTICIPATION

Researchers have found for years that American citizens most commonly participate in national politics by following presidential campaigns and voting in the presidential election. According to the National Election Studies from the Center for Political Studies at the University of Michigan, Americans reported the following types of political participation during the campaign for the election of 2000:

- 82% watched the campaign on television
- 73% voted in the election
- 34% tried to influence others how to vote
- 10% put a sticker on their car or wore a button
- 9% gave money to help a campaign
- 5% attended a political meeting
- 3% worked for a party or candidate

These statistics can be deceptive because they reflect how people *say* they participate. For example, despite the fact that 73% said they voted in the 2000 election, less than 50% actually did. One explanation is that people know that they should vote and don't want to admit it if they didn't.

WHO PARTICIPATES?

Experts have found several demographic characteristics to be strongly associated with high levels of political participation

- < **Education** - The single most important characteristic of a politically active citizen is a high level of education. Generally, the more education an individual has, the more likely he or she is to vote. Why? Perhaps because the well-educated better understand complex societal issues, or maybe they better understand the importance of civic responsibility. Or it could just be that their occupations are more flexible in allowing them to take time to go to the polls.
- < **Religious Involvement** - As religious involvement increases, so does political participation. Regular churchgoers are more likely to vote than those that do not attend. Why? Some possibilities are that church involvement leads to social connectedness, teaches organizational skills, and increases one's awareness of larger societal issues
- < **Race and Ethnicity**- If only race and ethnicity are considered, whites have higher voting rates than do blacks and Latinos. However, that tendency is somewhat deceptive. Some studies that control for income and education differences have found that the voting rates are about the same for whites, blacks, and Latinos.
- < **Age** - Despite the big push in the early 1970s to allow 18 year olds to vote, voting levels for 18-24 year olds are the lowest of any age category. Older people are more likely to vote than are younger people. The highest percentages of eligible voters who actually vote are in those groups 45 and above.
- < **Gender** - For many years women were underrepresented at the voting booths, but in recent elections, they have turned out in at least equal numbers to men. In fact, since 1992, turnout among women voters has exceeded that of men. However, this trend is relatively new, so in general we can say that men and women vote at about the same rates.
- < **Two-party competition** - Another factor in voter turnout is the extent to which elections are competitive in a state. More competitive elections generally bring higher turnouts, and voter rates increase significantly in years when presidential candidates are particularly competitive .

It is important to note that an individual is affected by many factors: his or her age, social class, education level, race, gender, and party affiliation. Thus factors form **cross-cutting cleavages**, making it very important to control for other factors that may produce a counter influence. For example, in order to compare gender differences in voting rates, a researcher would have to compare men and women of similar ages, education level, race, and party affiliation. Otherwise, the voting behavior may be caused by a factor other than gender.

VOTING

Voting is at the heart of a modern democracy. A vote sends a direct message to the government about how a citizen wants to be governed. Over the course of American history, voting rights have gradually expanded, so that today very few individuals are excluded. And yet, expanding suffrage is countered by a current trend: that of lower percentages of eligible voters in recent presidential elections actually going to the polls to cast their votes. For example, less than 50% of eligible voters actually voted in the 2000 presidential election. The trend did reverse itself in the election of 2004, when record numbers of Americans turned out to vote. Both parties worked hard to get new voter registrations and to encourage their base to actually get to the polls to vote.

EXPANDING SUFFRAGE

Originally the Constitution let individual states determine the qualifications for voting, and states varied widely in their laws. All states excluded women, most denied blacks the franchise, and property ownership was usually required. The expansion of the right to vote resulted from constitutional amendment, changing federal statutes, and Supreme Court decisions. Changes in suffrage over American history include:

- **Lifting of property restrictions** - At first, all states required voters to be property owners, with varying standards for how much property a man had to own to merit the right to vote. During the 1830s when Andrew Jackson was president, most states loosened their property requirements to embrace **universal manhood suffrage**, voting rights for all white males. By the end of Jackson's presidency, all states had lifted property restrictions from their voting requirements.
- **Suffrage for Black Americans and former slaves** - After the Civil War three important amendments intended to protect civil rights of the newly freed former slaves were added to the Constitution. The last of the three was added in 1870 - the **15th Amendment**, which said that the "right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude". Despite the amendment, many states passed **Jim Crow laws** - such as literacy tests, poll taxes, and the grandfather clause - that prevented many blacks from voting until well past the mid-20th century. During the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 60s, the Supreme Court declared various Jim Crow laws unconstitutional. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 and other federal laws prohibited states from using discriminatory practices, such as literacy tests.
- **Women's Suffrage** - In contrast to black Americans, women were kept from the polls by law more than by intimidation. An aggressive women's suffrage movement began before the Civil War, but it brought no national results until social attitudes toward women changed during the Progressive Movement of the early 20th century. The result was the passage of the **19th Amendment**, which extended the vote to women in 1920. The 19th Amendment doubled the size of the electorate.
- **18-21-year-olds** - A final major expansion of voting rights occurred in 1971 when the **26th Amendment** changed the minimum voting age from 21 to 18. A few states - such as Georgia, Kentucky, Alaska, and Hawaii - had allowed younger people to vote before 1971. The increased political activism of young people, particularly on college campuses during the 1960s, almost certainly inspired this expansion of voting rights.

VOTER TURNOUT

Voter turnout can be measured in two different ways: by showing the proportion of the **registered voters** that actually voted in a given election, and by showing the percentage of the **eligible voters** that vote. According to recent figures, American statistics look much better if the first method is employed. If we take the proportion of registered voters, between 75 and 80% voted in recent presidential elections; if we take the percentage of the voting-age population, only about 50% actually voted in 1996 and 2000, a figure much lower than most other democracies. The figure increased significantly in 2004, but it still remained lower than those in many countries. For example, in Great Britain and Canada, about 3/4 of all eligible voters vote in major elections, and in Italy and Australia, approximately 90% vote.

Because the results of the two methods differ so widely in the U.S., many observers believe that the main problem with getting people to the polls is the cumbersome process of voter registration.

Voter Registration

Laws vary according to state, but all states except North Dakota require voter registration. Until a few years ago some states required voters to register as much as six months before the election. In other words, if someone moved into the state, forgot to register, or passed their eighteenth birthday, he or she would be ineligible to vote

in any elections for six months. These rigid requirements were the result of voting abuses of the early 20th century (ballot box stuffing, people voting twice, dead people voting), but in recent times, they are believed to be responsible for low voter turnout. Federal law now prohibits any state from requiring more than a 30-day waiting period.

Most recently, in 1993 Congress passed the National Voter Registration Act - the "**motor-voter**" bill - that allows people to register to vote while applying for or renewing a driver's license. The act also requires states to provide assistance to facilitate voter registration. Removal of names from voting rolls for nonvoting is no longer allowed. Supporters of the law claim that it will add some 49 million people to the voting rolls, but of course it remains to be seen whether or not the actual percentages will increase. In general, Democrats have been more supportive of the bills than Republicans because they believe that the demographics of new voters might favor the Democratic Party. However, the tremendous increase in voter registrations in 2004 did not particularly benefit the Democrats, as many of the new voters supported the Republicans.

Neither the 1996 nor 2000 presidential elections showed increases in voting percentages, with only some 50% of eligible voters actually voting, a figure even lower than those for most other recent elections. The voting increase in 2004 was generally attributed to hard work by the political parties to get people registered and to the polls, and not to the motor-voter bills.

Other Reasons for Low Voter Turnouts

Several other reasons are often cited for low voter turnout in the United States:

- < **The difficulty of absentee voting** - Even if citizens remember to register ahead of time, they can only vote in their own precincts. If a voter is out of town on election day, he or she has to vote by absentee ballot. States generally have stringent rules about voting absentee. For example, some states require a voter to apply for a ballot in person.
- < **The number of offices to elect** - Some critics argue that because Americans vote for so many officials on many different levels of government, they cannot keep up with all the campaigns and elections. As a result, they don't know who to vote for, and they don't vote. Americans vote for more public officials and hold more elections by far than any other modern democracy. In most states, primary elections, general elections, and special elections are held every year or two.
- < **Weekday, non-holiday Voting** - In many other democracies, elections take place on weekends. Others that hold elections on weekdays declared election day a national holiday so that no one has to go to work. By law, national general elections in the United States are held on the Tuesday after the first Monday in November in even-numbered years. Most state and local elections are also held during the week, and only a few localities declare election day a national holiday. Many people find it difficult to get off work in order to vote.
- < **Weak political parties** - In many countries, parties make great efforts to get people to the polls. Even in earlier days in the United States, parties called their members to ensure that they register and that they vote. Parties also would often provide transportation to the polls. Although parties still stage "get-out-the-vote campaigns", parties today are not as strongly organized at the "grass roots" or local level as they used to be. However, this may be changing, since the parties did actively get out the vote in 2004, and they were aided by groups known as 527s (for the part of the tax code that allows them to be tax-free). These groups financed massive get-out-the-vote campaigns for both presidential candidates.

In some studies that compare political participation rates in the United States with other countries, Americans tend to engage more frequently in non-electoral forms of participation, such as campaign contributions, community involvement, and contacts with public officials.

Does it really matter that the U.S. has a low voter turnout rate? Some say no because they think it indicates that Americans are happy with the status quo. On the other hand, others say that a low voter turnout signals apathy about our political system in general. If only a few people take the time to learn about the issues, we are open to takeover and/or manipulation by authoritarian rule. The higher voter turnout in 2004 did not result in a change of presidents, but may have resulted from a two-sided struggle over whether or not a change should take place. Or, it may indicate that citizens are indeed becoming more interested in taking part in the political process.

Did the expansion of suffrage lead to lower voting rates by widening the voting base? Will the Motor-Voter Law eventually improve voting rates? Is voter registration still too difficult a process? Do we need to move

elections to weekends? Do we need fewer elected positions? Or do low voter turnouts just indicate that people are happy with government and don't feel the need to vote? Do the higher voting rates in the election of 2004 indicate a turnaround in political participation, or do they simply reflect an enthusiasm for that particular presidential race? Whatever the reasons, the United States today still has a lower voting rate than most other modern democracies.