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# American Political Ideologies and Beliefs

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## I. AMERICAN POLITICAL CULTURE

The term *political culture* refers to the values and patterns of thinking that a country's citizens share regarding politics. The core values of American political culture are found in the Constitution, the writings of the founders, and the laws and court rulings that have evolved throughout the country's history. While there is overall agreement among Americans regarding the shared values that make up the political culture, interpretations of these values and how they should be implemented in public policy vary. Various interpretations have led to divergent ideas about the role of government.

### A. INDIVIDUALISM

1. The American ideal of protecting personal freedoms from government interference is evident in the way the Bill of Rights safeguards civil liberties.
2. The values of individualism and sanctity of personal rights must be balanced with the responsibility of government to ensure order and stability. What limits on personal freedom are acceptable in the pursuit of security?
3. The Declaration of Independence stresses that the purpose of government is to ensure individual (natural) rights and that governments that fail to protect these rights may be abolished.

### B. EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY

1. Americans share a belief in equality of opportunity that all individuals should have the ability to compete on a level playing field where success is determined by hard work and talent.
2. Equality of opportunity is present in the Constitution and key pieces of legislation, including the Civil Rights Act (1964) and the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990).



*Be prepared to differentiate between the ideas of equality of opportunity and equality of outcome. Equality of opportunity means that all persons have the same ability to compete and succeed; whereas equality of outcome refers to the idea that all persons should be assured basic minimums for human existence and society should strive to reduce gross inequalities.*

### C. FREE ENTERPRISE

1. An important American political belief in free enterprise, an economic system in which private business operates for the most part independently of government control and involves the private ownership of property, is often associated with laissez-faire economics.
2. Although Americans broadly support the idea of a free enterprise system, ours is a mixed economy. Americans differ in their opinions about how much government regulation is needed. The federal government uses regulation to force companies to obey standards for the protection of citizens, but its control of business and industry is limited.
3. The right of citizens to own property free of government interference is most clearly seen in the Due Process Clauses of the Fifth and Fourteenth Amendments, which prohibit the taking of life, liberty, or property without due process of law. Property rights may also be affected by the government power of eminent domain, described in the Fifth Amendment, which allows the government to take private property for public use, so long as fair compensation is paid.

### D. RULE OF LAW

1. Rule of law is the American political value requiring that all individuals, including leaders, be held accountable to the same laws. It also stands for the idea that laws are applied the same regardless of an individual's position.
2. The rule of law includes the value that all individuals are treated the same in the eyes of the courts. This is seen in the various aspects of the Bill of Rights that protect the rights of the accused, including the Fifth, Sixth, and Eighth Amendments. Americans

expect that all individuals accused of a crime are granted due process and equal protection under the law.

3. The Constitution provides for a method in which government officials, including the president and federal judges, may be impeached and removed from office for violating the rule of law.
4. In "Federalist No. 51," Madison stated that the rule of law is the ultimate aim of government:

Justice is the end (goal) of government. It is the end (goal) of civil society. It ever has been, and ever will be, pursued, until it be obtained.

## E. LIMITED GOVERNMENT

1. The American political value of limited government is expressed in the Constitution, which restricts both the government and its leaders by carefully enumerating the powers of government, the powers denied to the government, and the rights of the people.
2. In "Federalist No. 51," Madison argued that the system of checks and balances created by the Constitution prevented any one branch of government from becoming too powerful, thus limiting the authority of the government. "It may be a reflection on human nature, that such devices [checks and balances] should be necessary to control the abuses of government."
3. In "Federalist No. 78," Hamilton argued that the independent courts created by the Constitution restrict the power of the other branches and safeguard individual rights.

The complete independence of the courts of justice is peculiarly essential in a limited constitution . . . which contains certain specified expectations to the legislative authority; such, for instance, is that it shall pass no bills of attainder, no ex post facto laws, and the like.

## II. POLITICAL SOCIALIZATION

### A. SHAPING POLITICAL ATTITUDES AND VALUES

1. The complicated manner in which an individual's sense of political identity, political party affiliation, and values related to government are shaped by the broader culture, is known as political socialization.

**B. FAMILY AND PEER INFLUENCES**

1. The family is the factor that most affects an individual's political socialization, including the development of a liberal or conservative ideology and political party preference.
2. The family is particularly influential because children are repeatedly exposed to their parents' views through discussions and media choices.
3. Peers and friends also influence the development of political ideas, in both children and adults. The time that people spend with peers and friends often impacts attitude development. Also, to the degree that individuals associate with like-minded friends, their shared attitudes may be amplified. However, friends are usually not as strong an influence in political socialization as family.

**C. EDUCATIONAL INFLUENCES**

1. American schools influence political socialization by teaching basic government, democratic values, and patriotism, as well as by promoting political participation.
2. There is a strong correlation between education level and political participation because education increases political efficacy, or the belief that an individual can have an impact on political outcomes.
3. Educational level is positively correlated with voter turnout; individuals who have higher levels of education are more likely to vote.

**D. SOCIAL ENVIRONMENTS/ORGANIZATIONAL MEMBERSHIP**

1. Membership in organizations is often based on shared values and goals (e.g., interest groups, labor unions, professional organizations). Social interaction within these groups influences members' political party affiliations and views on policy issues. Occupational groups may be dominated by a particular ideology, which may influence political attitudes and values.
2. Religious organizations influence the political beliefs and voting behaviors of their membership through the positions or stances the groups take on specific policy issues. Religious leaders can serve as agents of political socialization when they speak directly to members about specific public policy issues.
3. Social environment also encompasses geographic factors. Persons from specific regions tend to share certain perspectives. Likewise,

rural residents and urban dwellers each have unique shared interests.

### **E. GLOBALIZATION**

1. The world has become increasingly interconnected economically, socially, and politically. As a consequence, American political values have impacted, and been impacted by, other nations.
2. The passage of the Affordable Care Act in 2010, which expanded healthcare for Americans, reflects the influence of other countries, many of which guarantee healthcare for all or most citizens.
3. Social media platforms developed in the United States now bridge cultures and nations throughout the world.

### **F. GENERATIONAL, LIFE-CYCLE, and MAJOR POLITICAL EVENTS**

1. The shared experiences of individuals born in the same time period or generation can impact political attitudes and behavior. Different generations—such as the Millennials, Generation X, the Baby Boomers, and the Silent Generation—have shared experiences that shape long-lasting attitudes toward domestic and foreign policy.
  - a. Americans who grew up during the Great Depression (Silent Generation) shared certain traits, including financial responsibility and frugality. They also largely developed a strong and lasting loyalty to the Democratic Party.
  - b. Today's young Americans (Generation Z) have come of age in an era of gun violence and school shootings, influencing their attitudes toward gun control.
2. Life-cycle effects—changing personal circumstances that occur across the life span—are a factor in political socialization. Each stage of life has known and predictable effects on citizens' political attitudes and behaviors that correlate with the physical, social, and psychological changes of the life cycle. For example, college-age students, as a group, may be more concerned with student debt; those with children more concerned with education; and older persons who have accumulated greater wealth may be more concerned with taxation.
3. Major political events differ from generational influences in that significant events, such as the Kennedy assassination or 9/11, affect all persons who experience them across the generational spectrum.



*On the AP® exam you will not be asked to identify the specific years for each generational cohort (e.g., Baby Boomers), but you should be prepared to analyze charts and graphs to discern voting trends and policy stands within these groups.*

## G. MEDIA INFLUENCES

1. Since the advent of radio and, later, television, media has had a significant impact on the process of political socialization and on public opinion related to policy and overall trust in government.
2. The media, through entertainment, news, and informational programming, provides people with background knowledge and shapes their attitudes about the functions and value of government institutions.
3. The expansion of political coverage in the media to include cable news networks, Internet news outlets, and social media have allowed individuals to selectively choose to receive information from sources that share their own political perspective, thereby reinforcing their pre-existing perceptions and limiting new information. This is sometimes referred to as an “echo chamber.”
4. Social media users tend to interact most with others who have similar political viewpoints and share information that reinforces those attitudes.

## III. POLITICAL IDEOLOGY

### A. A WIDE SPECTRUM OF BELIEFS

1. A political ideology represents a collection of beliefs about morality, economics, efficiency, how society should function, and the proper role of government.
2. Political ideology can be measured and represented in various ways, including grids and graphic representations. Traditionally, the liberal-conservative spectrum has been represented as a line, with liberalism on the left and conservatism on the right. (Hence the terms *left* and *right*.)
3. Although ideological belief systems are generally consistent, they may at times seem to lack internal consistency.

- a. Liberal and conservative ideologies are closely tied to the Democratic and Republican parties in the United States.
  - b. Party constituencies change over time, and changing constituencies may influence ideological systems.
4. A party's platform is a compilation of the policy positions the party favors, which reflect its ideology.

## **B. LIBERAL IDEOLOGY**

1. Liberal ideology encompasses the following beliefs:
  - a. Government has an important role to play in society.
  - b. The government should regulate the economy in order to ensure that efficiency is maximized and noneconomic interests are protected.
  - c. Government should refrain from regulating moral issues in most cases. Issues such as abortion, same-sex marriage, marijuana, and other private matters should be left up to individuals.
  - d. Government should spend money to assist citizens with social services, such as housing, food, and healthcare.
2. The Democratic Party is closely aligned with liberal ideology.

## **C. CONSERVATIVE IDEOLOGY**

1. Conservative ideology encompasses the following beliefs:
  - a. Government should play only a minimal role in society.
  - b. The government should engage in minimal regulation of the economy; market forces maximize efficiency and solve most problems.
  - c. Government has an important role to play in regulating moral issues. The government should regulate moral issues in order to uphold traditional moral beliefs.
  - d. Government funding of social goods should be limited. Citizens should not be restrained and should be expected to provide for themselves.
2. The Republican Party is closely aligned with conservative ideology.

## D. COMPARING IDEOLOGIES

1. The following chart shows the general liberal (Democratic) and conservative (Republican) positions on common issues.

<b>Liberal Position</b>	<b>Public Policy Issue</b>	<b>Conservative Position</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- increased government regulation of business to protect workers and the environment</li> <li>- markets need regulation to function efficiently</li> <li>- favors taxation of businesses and the wealthy to support spending on public goods</li> </ul>	<b>Economy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- government should minimally regulate the economy</li> <li>- market forces operate to produce efficiency and productivity in markets</li> <li>- favors reduced taxation of businesses and the wealthy in order to stimulate the economy</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- favors federal power</li> </ul>	<b>Federalism</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- favors states' rights</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- favors reducing military spending</li> <li>- supports involvement in global affairs, diplomacy, and foreign aid</li> </ul>	<b>National Security</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- favors increasing military spending</li> <li>- supports limitations on foreign aid, limited involvement with foreign nations, and military strength</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- increased funding of social welfare programs</li> </ul>	<b>Social Welfare Programs</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- reduced funding of social welfare programs</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- increased funding of public education</li> </ul>	<b>Education</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- vouchers and support for private and religious education</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- supports legal immigration and citizenship path for certain groups of undocumented immigrants</li> </ul>	<b>Immigration</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- reduced legal immigration and opposes citizenship path for undocumented immigrants</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- favors abortion rights (pro-choice)</li> </ul>	<b>Abortion Rights</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- opposes abortion rights (pro-life)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- favors expanded civil rights protections</li> <li>- favors affirmative action</li> </ul>	<b>Civil Rights</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- favors limited civil rights protections</li> <li>- opposes affirmative action</li> </ul>



Liberal Position	Public Policy Issue	Conservative Position
– favors regulations to protect the environment and combat climate change	<b>Environmental Protection</b>	– opposes government action to regulate business – views climate change as an insignificant problem
– favors restrictions on gun purchases and ownership	<b>Gun Control</b>	– opposes restrictions on gun purchases and ownership
– supports expanded access and government involvement in healthcare	<b>Healthcare</b>	– favors private sector, free-market healthcare system with minimal government involvement



*Be sure you understand the difference between the similar-sounding and interrelated concepts of political culture, political socialization, and political ideology.*

- *Political culture is the broadly shared set of political values, beliefs, and norms held within a society.*
- *Political socialization is the process by which individuals within a society acquire their political values and opinions. Agents of socialization include family, education, and the media.*
- *Political ideology is a coherent set of political ideas held by an individual or organization. Note that party affiliation is related to, but different from, political ideology. Members of political parties may not share the party's ideology in its entirety.*

## E. LIBERTARIAN IDEOLOGY

1. Libertarian ideology shares beliefs with both liberal and conservative ideologies.
2. Libertarian ideology opposes government regulation of both economic activity and personal choices. For libertarians, individual liberty is the highest value, and government should exist only to protect private property rights.

3. Libertarians are consistent in their view of the proper role of government in society, believing:
  - a. The government should not regulate the economy, but allow the market to function freely according to the decisions of its participants.
  - b. The government should not involve itself in people's personal decisions. Government interference in choices involving marriage, sex, drugs, gambling, and other issues is a violation of personal liberty.
  - c. For example, a libertarian would favor policies legalizing the commercial sale of marijuana and reducing government spending on prisons.



## **POLITICAL CULTURE AND PUBLIC POLICY**

### **A. LIBERTY VS. ORDER**

1. The debate between conservatism and liberalism reflects the tension between liberty and order, which must be balanced in order for society to function optimally.
  - a. Excessive personal liberty will lead to chaos.
  - b. Excessive social order will stifle personal liberty and creativity.
2. Historically, policy outcomes reflect the preferences of whichever position is dominant among voters and policymakers at any given time.
3. The changing power of various groups is often reflected in policy changes, as when alcohol prohibition was enacted and then repealed fourteen years later.

### **B. THE CULTURE WAR**

1. The term *culture war* is used to describe the deep division and increasing polarization between those Americans who wish to return to an idealized culture based on traditional values (conservatism) and those who favor change (liberalism).
2. Differing belief systems are both exploited and exacerbated by political organizations, interest groups, and media outlets to drive enthusiasm and support for parties and causes.
3. United States politics may at times reflect polarization, or the tendency for citizens to adopt more extreme positions.

4. The polarization characteristic of the culture war creates political gridlock as fewer voters and politicians inhabit the middle of the political field.

**V.**

## **IDEOLOGICAL DIFFERENCES: THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT IN THE ECONOMY**

### **A. THE POLITICS OF THE ECONOMY**

1. The health of the economy has historically been one of the most significant predictors of voter attitudes toward the party in the White House.
2. Maintaining a strong economy is a top priority for politicians of both political parties.
  - a. Politicians desire to keep unemployment rates low. When unemployment is low, citizens have money to spend, which stimulates business activity and creates more jobs. It also reduces the cost of government unemployment and social welfare programs.
  - b. Politicians also attempt to control inflation, which is the rate at which the cost of goods and services in an economy increases. Economists generally agree that a low inflation rate is necessary for healthy economic growth. A high inflation rate can negatively affect workers' standard of living. If growth in wages does not exceed inflation, standards of living remain flat or decline.

### **B. FISCAL POLICY**

1. Fiscal policy refers to the taxing and spending methodology followed by the government in order to foster economic health.
2. Keynesian theory (developed by economist John Maynard Keynes) is based on supply and demand in an economy.
  - a. When consumer demand for goods and services drops, businesses sell fewer goods and services, and workers lose jobs.
  - b. When jobs are lost, spending contracts further, and an economic recession may result.
  - c. Keynes believed that the government should actively intervene to maintain or restore economic health.

- d. To stimulate consumer spending and business activity, the government should put money into the economy when necessary by reducing taxes or implementing more government programs that put money into the hands of consumers by creating jobs or providing benefits in order to drive demand.
  - e. Keynesian economics formed the basis for FDR's New Deal legislation, which was enacted in response to the Great Depression, as well as the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, passed in response to the Great Recession.
  - f. These types of policies are often referred to as stimulus policies, because they are intended to stimulate the economy to sustain independent growth.
3. Supply-side economic theory, popularized by economist Arthur Laffer, advocates the reduction of taxes, primarily on businesses and wealthy individuals, in order to stimulate business investment, which will stimulate job creation and economic growth.
- a. Supply-side theory is sometimes called trickle-down economics, because the theory proposes that leaving more wealth in the hands of those at the top of the economy will result in more wealth making its way down to the middle and working classes.
  - b. Supply-side economics advocates reducing taxation and limiting government spending as a way to stimulate economic activity.
  - c. Supply-siders theorize that because taxes on economic transactions stimulate government revenues, tax cuts will generate more revenue than is lost by reducing taxes.



*Keynesian economic theory is favored by liberals and is associated with Democratic presidents, notably Franklin Roosevelt, Barack Obama, and Joseph Biden. Supply-side economic theory is favored by conservatives and is associated with Republican presidents, notably Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush, and Donald Trump. Supply-side theory is, in fact, sometimes called Reaganomics.*

### **C. MONETARY POLICY**

1. Another tool at the disposal of the government for maintaining the health of the economy is monetary policy, which is the ability to regulate the amount of money available in the economy.
2. The prices of goods and services are heavily influenced by how much money is available within a society. The more dollars floating around in the economy, the easier they are to come by, and the less each one will buy.
3. The Federal Reserve System is the central banking system of the United States and the vehicle through which the government controls the supply of money in circulation.
  - a. The Federal Reserve System consists of 12 regional Federal Reserve Banks through which money is distributed to financial institutions, and a Federal Reserve Board (the Fed) of seven members appointed by the president (with Senate confirmation) to staggered terms.
  - b. The Fed controls the money supply by:
    - setting interest rates for government bonds.
    - buying and selling government bonds and other financial instruments with member banks. Bond purchases from banks put money into the economy; bond sales to banks reduce the amount of money banks have available to lend.
    - setting the federal funds rate, which requires banks to keep a minimum percentage of deposits on hand in cash. Increasing the reserve rate reduces the money available to lend, while reducing the rate increases the money supply.
    - setting the rates at which banks may borrow directly from the government and may charge each other for funds.
4. The money supply affects the economy in two primary ways.
  - a. Increasing the amount of money available to banks to sell as loans puts more money into the economy, which stimulates spending and growth.
  - b. Reducing the money supply slows the economy and checks inflation.
5. The Fed is charged with modulating the supply of money in the economy and regulating banks in order to maintain economic stability and sustainable economic growth.



*The economic health of the country requires constant attention and fine-tuning. The ability to adjust both fiscal and monetary policy provides the government with tools for maintaining a stable and growing economy. Be sure you understand the differences between these two areas of policy.*

Fiscal Policy	Monetary Policy
<i>– impacts economy through adjustments in taxation and spending</i>	<i>– impacts economy through adjustments in interest rates and the money supply</i>
<i>– initiated by Congress</i>	<i>– implemented by the Federal Reserve Board</i>