

The American context

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Many images have been, and are, associated with the USA. People inside and outside the country have varied, and often conflicting, views about it. Some of these perspectives are based on observable and quantifiable facts. Others may be conditioned by ideology and rhetoric.

American self-images sometimes betray an exalted and isolationist view of the nation's claimed 'exceptionalism' (a unique mission in the world, difference from other countries, idealistic values, high aspirations and belief in its own destiny). But, historically and at present, there have been divided opinions in the USA itself about the country's ideals, values, institutions, political policies, sense of purpose and national identity. American society remains split politically, economically and socially to varying degrees, although there are also substantial unifying forces at work. Opinion polls suggest that, under the impetus of national and international events, Americans, like other peoples, swing between periods of idealism/positivism and cynicism/dissatisfaction about their country. However, periods of doubt and conflict, such as those during the two world wars (1914–18 and 1939–45), the 1930s Great Depression, the 1945–89 Cold War, the 1950s–1960s civil-rights campaigns, the 1960s–1975 Vietnam War and the 2003–4 Iraq War, have often resulted in adaptation and renewal.

Some non-American (but traditionally pro-US) opinion laments what is seen as a recent decline in historic American values and the great republican ideals of the USA, which acted as a beacon to the rest of the world. Other more extreme views are frequently driven by anger, prejudice, envy, ignorance or bias towards other systems. For example, some current US foreign policies, stemming from America's position as the world's only superpower, are forcefully criticized by both its enemies and some of its supposed allies. This has been evident since the 11 September 2001 attacks on New York and Washington (9/11) after which the US Administration sought to protect its domestic and global interests, declared its opposition to terrorism and initiated coalition military action in Afghanistan and Iraq.

In order to understand the contemporary USA and appreciate how it has developed historically, some conditioning factors need to be emphasized. Among these are:

- the treatment of Native Americans and other minority ethnic groups over time;
- the early colonial settlement of the country by Europeans from the late fifteenth century and the establishment of specific social values and structures;

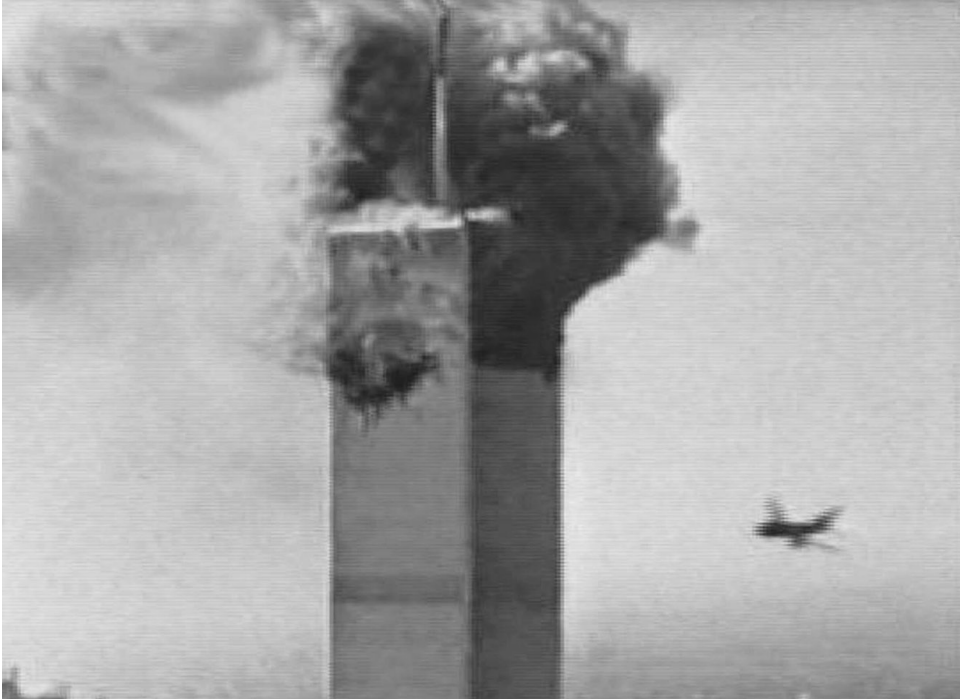


PLATE 1.1 Terrorist attack on World Trade Center, New York, 11 September 2001. The South Tower, attacked by the first plane, is burning; the second plane heads for the North Tower. (*Rex Features*)

- the War for Independence from Britain (1775–83);
- the westward expansion of the new nation;
- the effects of large-scale immigration into the country, especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries;
- the Civil War to end slavery and southern-state secession from the Union (1861–5);
- the vaunted principles of the nation (like human dignity and rights to freedom, justice and opportunity) contained in the Declaration of Independence (1776) and the US Constitution (1787);
- associated ideologies of egalitarianism, individualism and utopianism;
- the later development of corporate capitalism with its management and business philosophies;
- increasing government regulation and the growth of an overarching bureaucracy that have arguably undermined individual autonomy;
- American attitudes towards the rest of the world, particularly during the two world wars and the Cold War period;
- the development of the USA as a dominant economic, military and cultural force since the nineteenth century;

- current arguments as to whether the USA is the prime driver of contemporary globalization (interdependent economic, political and cultural forces) or whether America itself is also subject to globalizing forces beyond its control.

These historical features have created three major cultures in the USA, which may conflict with each other and operate on levels of idealism and pragmatism. The first is an ethnic culture centred on Native-American civilizations, European colonial settlement, African-American slavery and immigration movements, which reflects the society's human diversity. The second is a political-legal culture based on individualism, constitutionalism and respect for the law. It tries to unite the people under ideal versions of 'Americanness', such as egalitarianism, morality and patriotism, which should be reflected in political and legal institutions. The third is an economic and consumer culture driven by corporate and individual competition which encourages profit and the consumption of goods and services. Most aspects of US society are directly or indirectly conditioned by these major cultures. However, a considerable number of people (such as youth groupings, political extremists, radical fringes and an underclass of disadvantaged, unequal individuals) may be alienated from them.

Since American independence in 1776, these elements have created what has been seen as a unique, 300-year-old national and cultural identity in the USA. The difficulty lies in determining what this may actually be in practice. Some critics argue that, at a time of profound transformation, the nation is in danger of losing its traditional foundations and is suffering from a crisis of self-image. Others maintain that, on the basis of information in the 2000 census, a sense of American nationalism and unity is in fact growing and becoming stronger.

Ethnic culture

In terms of ethnic culture (see Chapters 2, 3 and 4), US colonial settlement was largely composed of British arrivals, who shared the land with existing Native-American communities and other Europeans. Until 1776, over half of the population came from the British Isles. These people assimilated other early European settlers into a white, mainly Anglo-American, Protestant dominant culture. They were responsible for promoting many of the new nation's political, social, constitutional and religious institutions, which produced a mainstream American identity and set of values whose impact is still felt. Their political principles were based on democracy, grass-roots sovereignty (independence of the people) and scepticism about government. Their social values were conditioned by a belief in individualism, the work ethic (working hard in this life to be rewarded here and in the next) and the rule of law (respect for and acceptance of legal rules applicable to all individuals).

After the colonial settler period and American independence from Britain, north-western Europe supplied over two-thirds of episodic US immigration for most of the nineteenth century. There were also many Asian immigrants (particularly Chinese) during this time. At the end of that century there was a shift towards newcomers from southern and eastern Europe. Much of this later immigration was neither Anglo nor Protestant, and it significantly altered the demographic composition of the USA. Despite increasing immigration restrictions, the twentieth century saw a great variety of other nationalities from all over the world immigrating to the USA. In the 1980s, 1990s and early twenty-first century, the largest groups of immigrants have come from Asia, South and Central America and the Caribbean. Today, the largest minority immigrant population is Latino. Its increasing presence is found in southern states such as Florida, Texas, New Mexico and California, as well as in the big cities of New York and Los Angeles and in smaller towns throughout the country, for example, in the mid-west. In total, some 60 million immigrants have entered the USA between 1820 and 2000.

The effects of early colonial settlement, the importation of African slaves and later immigration on US culture have been substantial, in terms of both the figures involved and the high number of very different groups with origins worldwide. This background of colonial settlement, large-scale immigration, slavery and Native-American experiences is different in size and scope from that of other nations, arguably defines American history as special and provides the USA with a distinct, ethnically based identity. There is therefore some truth in the frequent assertion that America is a nation of immigrants (and the descendants of immigrants). Other critics argue, however, that the heart of the USA lies in the original European settlers, that Anglo-Protestant culture is still central to American national identity, and that the country remains a fundamentally Protestant society with its large number of mainstream and evangelical Protestant churches. These features continue to influence social, economic and political life.

Immigrants have considerably affected public life at different times in US history. But they have also experienced difficulties of integration into the existing society due to language problems or differences in cultural practices. There have been conflicts and racial tensions between settled groups and successive waves of immigrants which have sometimes erupted into violence. These factors reveal an intolerant nativism (discrimination towards newcomers by the existing population) and racism in many areas of American life, frequently in institutionalized form, which have continued to the present. Ethnic diversity has brought advantages and disadvantages, but it has also reduced the dominance of the original Anglo-American Protestant culture, which had to take account of a growing social pluralism. However, it is argued that the USA has historically managed to integrate its immigrants successfully into the existing society, and newcomers have generally adapted to American life.

On the other hand, many diverse ethnic groups have had to both coexist and struggle for individual expression. Today, they must somehow live together in spite of tensions between them, and there is always the possibility of serious political and social instability. In some cases, this may amount to rejection of immigrants by indigenous Americans, or rejection of Americanization by some immigrant groups. Critics continue to debate whether these conflicts (arising out of social pluralism) and the problems of assimilation or integration by new groups should be seen as distinctively American or whether they are also applicable in varying degrees to other nations that have diverse populations.

Political-legal culture

The second major American culture lies in the political-legal arena (see Chapters 5, 6 and 8). Its nature has been largely shaped by

- the central place of law and the Constitution in American life;
- the restrictions that the Constitution places upon politics;
- the fact that many Americans believe in minimal government, especially at the federal level;
- the need to produce consensual (widely agreed) national politics.

The Constitution has to be interpreted by the judiciary (particularly the US Supreme Court in Washington, DC), and the governmental system of checks and balances sometimes results in stalemate. But these features do help to solidify the society, and idealized versions of 'America' constructed through its political institutions (both federal and state) and a general respect for the law can minimize conflict.

These features of political-legal culture also illustrate the degree of abstraction that is involved in defining 'the USA' and 'Americanness'. The notion of what constitutes 'America' has had to be revised over time and reflects the tension between a materialistic practical reality, with its restrictions, and an idealistic abstract hope. Racial or ethnic differences have demonstrably presented the greatest barriers to national unity, and race and immigration continue to be concerns. Consequently, it is often argued that the American political-legal system consists of both hard-nosed manipulation of group and ideological interests and exaggerated rhetoric to promote a common ideal.

US society has had to deal with the tensions resulting from ethnic diversity following centuries of immigration. Responses to pluralism have often resulted in consensus politics based on political and judicial compromise. US politics are not normally therefore considered to be as polarized or radical as in other nations, although public-opinion polls have historically suggested an underlying 60 per cent support for Democrat Party policies and 40 per cent for the Republican

Party. In 2004, this became more polarized on many issues, including 50 per cent support for both political parties. Differences between them for dealing with majority and minority rights, the economy, education, religion and social issues continue to play a central, and sometimes divisive, role in American society. Polarization includes support and opposition across party lines on issues such as abortion.

American politics often tend to be more concerned with local, special and regional or state interests than national matters, reflecting the federal nature of US government. Politicians in Washington, DC promote their own constituency legislation as a response to local and regional pressures (including ethnic and minority matters). Such concerns, as well as national issues, often persuade American voters to vote simultaneously for political representatives from different political parties. A drawback to political participation has been the low turnout of voters for many types of recent elections in the USA (except for the 2004 presidential election). Some critics argue that this suggests a significant alienation from the political process and a feeling that power is in the hands of an elite political establishment that does not consider the concerns of ordinary voters (see 'American Attitudes to US society', pp. 14–17).

Economic culture

The third major culture comprises the economic system and its associated consumerism (see Chapter 9). The US economic and social cultures are both materialistic/practical and idealistic/abstract. A competitive economic philosophy, which is supposed to deliver a range of consumer goods and services demanded by the market, is connected to a belief in individualism. Americans historically have had to fight for their own personal economic and social survival, a process which can also give rise to exploitation of others, excesses and a Darwinian 'survival of the fittest' mentality. The competitive nature of American life arguably contributes to disparities of wealth, social inequalities and varying life opportunities. But this model disguises the structures of economic co-operation, charitable organizations and volunteerism, which have also always been present in American society.

The corporate domination of economic life can also militate against the individual consumer, resulting in inferior products, bad service and little variety or real choice. Americans have historically been very sceptical of Big Business as well as Big Government. Corporate behaviour can be corrupt and fraudulent, as witnessed by successful prosecutions of business leaders and the collapse of corporations such as Enron (2003), WorldCom and Tyco.



PLATE 1.2 Shopping mall in Orlando, Florida, 1991. Malls have become a consumer and cultural institution in American life and a symbol of economic capitalism, which appeal to many social groups, particularly teenagers. They consist of, usually under one roof, a wide variety of shops, cafes, restaurants, banks and car parks, and may often be located outside city or town centres.

(Paul Brown/Rex Features)

Americanness and national identity

The ethnic, political-legal and economic cultures influence and are reflected in other aspects of American life, such as education (see Chapter 11), the health-care system and social services (Chapter 10), the media (Chapter 12), religious groups (Chapter 13) and the worlds of the arts, sports and leisure (Chapter 14). They also condition questions of what it means to be American ('Americanness') and what constitutes national identity.

A significant historical dilemma for the USA has been how to balance the need for national unity with the existence of ethnic diversity and, thus, how to avoid the dangers of fragmentation. An emphasis was initially placed on 'Americanization', the assimilation of different ethnic groups into a shared, mainly Anglo-American-based identity. The familiar metaphor of the 'melting pot', to indicate ethnic blending, was frequently seen instead as pressure to totally integrate into this dominant culture, with a resulting loss of ethnic identity.

In recent decades, debates on national identity have centred on questions of unity (or Americanization) as against diversity (or ethnic pluralism and

multiculturalism). These reflect a pattern which has shifted between reform/liberal and consolidation/conservative periods. In the 1950s, ethnic differences and issues seemed to be declining, but have revived since the 1960s, particularly with the growth of Latino ethnic groups in the 1990s. Arguments have vacillated between the adequacy of old values of Americanism (often represented by conservatives) and ethnic- or minority-group interests (supported by liberals). It is suggested that the American ideal of *e pluribus unum* (out of many one) is an abstract concept which does not reflect reality. On the other hand, emphases on ethnicity and difference have arguably weakened the possibility of achieving a set of values that could represent a distinctive 'American Way of Life'. Some critics feel that American society is at risk because of the diversity of competing cultures and interest groups, with each claiming special treatment. They maintain that the sense of an overarching American identity has weakened in the past thirty-five years.

From the late 1970s through the 1990s, there has been a reaction against liberal policies and affirmative-action programmes for minority groups, which allegedly discriminate in the latter's favour in areas such as education and employment. Conservatives assert what they consider to be traditional American values, and many are opposed to liberal policies on abortion, gun control, school education, same-sex marriage, religion, the death penalty and immigration. These debates have further increased anxieties about national identity and where the country is headed. The conflicts over supposed fundamental American values continue at present in many areas of national life.

Such concerns have led critics to argue that the USA should be regarded ethnically, culturally and ideologically as a 'mosaic', 'salad bowl', 'pizza' or 'stew mix', rather than a 'melting-pot'. The old 'melting pot' model of America, which implied ultimate cultural unity, has been rejected in some quarters. But the metaphors of salads and stews nevertheless suggest that variety and difference should somehow be incorporated into a larger 'American' whole.

The metaphors do indicate a certain acceptance of cultural and ethnic pluralism. Heterogeneity (difference) and an adherence to roots have continued despite pressures and arguments in support of homogenization (sameness). It is argued that degrees of separateness and assimilation vary between ethnic groups, and that absolute social integration is both undesirable and impossible. But this can lead to hybrid cultural identities on the one hand and the breakdown of strong national links on the other.

Critics of 'diversity' and 'ethnic pluralism' maintain that the USA is in danger of splitting apart under the strain of identity politics, political ideologies, ethnic division, cultural differences, gender wars and economic inequality. However, it is also argued that while there are extremes of opinion, unfairness, diversity and vested interests in the society, strong underlying moral and political commitments to freedom, justice, tolerance and equality under the law limit divisions and promote unity, homogeneity and stability. American ideologies were historically

formed from violent struggles as well as Enlightenment reason, and the USA still has to live resiliently with conflict and anxiety.

Arguably, the tension is between absolute pluralism (referred to in some models as multiculturalism where the interests of an ethnic group are equally valid to any other and should be supported) on the one hand and an acceptance of pluralism under a prevailing umbrella American identity on the other. The latter solution has to be achieved within defining national structures which allow the facts of pluralism and identity with roots to exist. Degrees of assimilation (such as citizenship for immigrants, education, home-ownership, language acquisition, intermarriage, economic opportunities and upward mobility) could then be achieved, while differences would be seen as valid. The 2000 US Census seems to indicate that natural forces of assimilation have been growing and that a sense of civic commonality or a distinctive American nationalism have increased (see 'American Attitudes to US society', pp. 14–17). Nevertheless, a liberal, intellectual ideology maintains that all ethnic cultures are equally valid and that a multicultural, multi-ethnic society should be the ultimate national goal.

Opposed critics argue that the arrival of large numbers of Latinos (including Mexicans) in the USA since the 1980s has created a substantial community that allegedly rejects Americanization and American traditional values. Official bilingualism (English and Spanish), especially in California and the south-west (together with Spanish-speakers in Florida, Texas and elsewhere) and an alleged Latino reluctance to renounce old national identities seem to suggest a model composed of one nation with two cultures. But many Latinos do in fact integrate into the American whole. Historically, Irish, Jewish, Chinese and Italian immigrants, among others, have been subjected to suspicion and hostility before achieving integration. The sense of a current crisis and fear of a growing decline in national unity may therefore seem exaggerated and may overlook the US ability to Americanize immigrants.

Whatever the degree of attempted social incorporation, Americans have historically tried to construct a sense of an overarching national identity and unity by binding the ethnically diverse population to central images or symbols of 'Americanness', such as the national flag (also known as the Stars and Stripes, Old Glory or the Star-Spangled Banner), the pledge of allegiance to the flag, the Declaration of Independence, the Liberty Bell, Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation and Gettysburg Address, the 'Star-Spangled Banner' (the US national anthem) and the Constitution. These are meant to provide common cultural signs which promote loyalty to shared notions of what American citizenship, 'America' and 'Americanness' might be. Their representative qualities attempt to avoid the potentially divisive elements of economic, social, class or ethnic differences.

Certain social and individual values have also been traditionally associated with these symbols, particularly those rights stemming from the Declaration of



PLATE 1.3 A girl in Cedarburg, Wisconsin celebrates Independence Day, 4 July. This official US holiday commemorates the day in 1776 when the Continental Congress sitting in Independence Hall, Philadelphia gave its approval to the Declaration of Independence from Britain, and is now celebrated with processions, speeches, flags and fireworks.

(Stewart Cook/Rex Features)

Independence, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. In the frequent attempts to define 'Americanness', elements such as self-reliance, individualism or sturdy independence, utopianism, egalitarianism, freedom, opportunity, democracy, liberty, anti-statism (distrust of government), populism (grass-roots activism), a sense of destiny and respect for the law are stressed. They stem from the ideas of Puritan religion and the European Enlightenment, which influenced the framers of the Declaration of Independence and the US Constitution. Thus, there are layers of idealism and abstraction in American life that coexist, and may often clash, with reality. Yet this situation is not unique. It echoes the experience of other countries, particularly those that are unions, federations or collections of different peoples with contrasting roots and traditions, who need to erect new national identities while preserving some aspects of their original identities.

The degree to which these values are accepted and propagated in US society is significant, irrespective of whether they are individually or nationally achieved. They are attractive and valid for many people and are revealed both in times of normality and crisis. A key feature of American life, therefore, is how individuals manage to combine traditional ideals of the nation with the actual realities of society and how they cope with the resulting oppositions. There is an essential pragmatism beneath the surface idealism, a need to apply ideas or values to real situations and a 'can-do' respect for practical solutions to problems.

Traditionally, some critics have tried to explain the USA and its national identity by 'American traits'. Features like restlessness, escape from restraints, change, action, mobility, quests for new experiences, self-improvement and a belief in potential supposedly constitute typical American behaviour. They are often attributed to the legacy of immigrant and frontier experiences and an American belief in progress, both for the individual and for the larger society. Americans allegedly refuse to accept a fixed fate or settled location, but seek new jobs, new horizons and new beginnings in a hunt for self-fulfilment and self-definition. The huge sales of self-improvement books based on popular psychology suggest that such attitudes (or the desire to attain them) are widespread.

Many Americans, on the other hand, seek roots and stability in their lives, their institutions and in their search for a national identity. Similarly, while the alleged informality of American life is supposedly founded on individualism, egalitarianism and a historical rejection of European habits, many Americans respect and desire formalities, order and hierarchy.

Americans may stress their individualism, distrust of Big Business and Big Government and their desire to be free. But communalism, voluntary activities, charitable organizations and group endeavours are also a feature of US life. Individuals additionally have to cope with corporate, political and social bureaucracy, employment environments and economic and social hierarchies with their associated power bases. Indeed, American literature is full of characters' romantic attempts to be free and their frequent failures when faced with the realities of society and their individual conditions. Public-opinion polls also reflect

the tension between ideal aspirations and everyday facts of life (see 'American Attitudes to US society', pp. 14–17).

One cannot therefore define a single and simple set of traits which are shared by all Americans. Diversity, individual differences and departures from consensual norms, whether from personal, social, religious or economic circumstances/values, limit possibilities and can result in contradictions or tensions rather than unified beliefs. Arguably, the supposedly American traits are universal characteristics and are neither exceptional in themselves nor distinctively American.

Nevertheless, the three major cultures and various subcultures have produced a composite Americanness and distinctive US image, which have influenced an international or globalized culture. They are expressed through Hollywood films, television and radio, music and art, newspapers and magazines, professional and amateur sport, consumption patterns, well-known chain stores and brand names, corporate and financial institutions, business and management philosophies, political activity, ethnic concerns, religion and popular culture.

Social and institutional change

The major US cultures are not static. On the one hand, they may influence and refashion other nations' cultures. On the other hand, international pressures for change can similarly modify the major cultures themselves. Even though these are driven and considerably conditioned by increasingly multinational or global forces, they must also remain responsive to specific American political, minority and consumer pressures. A national mass culture and economic system are inevitably integrationist forces as they cater for the American market.

Social organizations have been gradually constructed over time and reflect a variety of values and practices. Some of these structures are particular to the USA and others are similar to those of other nations. All have developed over the past 300 years to cope with, and adapt to, an increasingly complex, diverse and dynamic society. They take many different forms and sizes, operate on national, state and local levels, and may be public or private in character.

The larger elements, such as federal and state governments, are involved with public business, but there is also a range of smaller social activities, such as sports, local communities, neighbourhoods, religion, the theatre and various expressions of ethnic identity. These may take on more individualistic forms than the larger public institutions.

For some critics, it is the localized life and behaviour of people in small-town America which typically defines their society, rather than centralized federal institutions. However, the larger frameworks do serve as a cement which holds local activities and people together. They also contribute to an umbrella sense of American identity and 'Americanness'. The USA, like other countries, gains its identity from a mixture of the local and the national, which inform and influence each other.

The American 'way of life' is partly defined by how citizens function within and respond to local and national institutions, whether positively or negatively. The large number and variety of such institutions means that there are many different 'ways of life' and all contribute to the diversity and particular characteristics of American society.

The following chapters stress the historical context of US growth and suggest that the contemporary still owes much to the past. Social structures are adaptable, provide frameworks for new situations and their present roles may be different from their original functions. They have changed and evolved over time as they have been influenced not only by elite and government policies, but also by grass-roots impulses and reactions. This process of change and adaptation continues and reflects current anxieties and concerns in American life.

Social structures at various levels contribute to a culture of varied and often conflicting habits and ideals, as well as being practical organizations for realizing them. The following chapters therefore attempt to present a range of critical viewpoints on the society and its institutions in an attempt to describe what may, or may not, be regarded as distinctively American. They first consider the physical geography of the USA and its cultural regions, indigenous peoples, settler and immigration experiences, and women and minorities. They then examine the central social structures within which Americans have to operate, analyse their historical growth and modern roles, and consider their underlying values.

American attitudes to US society

Social structures are not remote abstractions. They affect individuals directly in their daily lives. Despite their diversity of origins and values, Americans do have shared concerns. They can identify in public-opinion polls what are for them the major problems facing the country and which affect most people in varying degrees. Although there is some scepticism about the accuracy of polls, they are now regarded as significant guides. They valuably reflect how respondents are sensitive to changing conditions over time. Such concerns can determine people's judgements on political and other issues at any one time, including elections.

In the first half of 2004, all American polls (according to PollingReport in May 2004) showed that the economy (including taxes and the federal budget deficit), unemployment, jobs and foreign competition were primary concerns for people, together with education (see Table 1.1). But as the country approached the presidential election in November 2004, the campaign against terrorism, domestic (homeland) security, foreign policy and Iraq became increasingly important, although the economy and jobs were still prioritized; education slipped in the ratings. Social questions about health care, Medicare (medical programme for people over sixty-five years of age), Medicaid (medical care for low-income people under sixty-five), the cost of prescription drugs, social security (federal

TABLE 1.1 Top fourteen problems facing the USA, 2004.

<i>Problem</i>	<i>Extremely/ very important (%)</i>
Education	86
The economy	86
Terrorism	85
Health care	82
The situation in Iraq	80
Taxes	74
The federal budget deficit	72
Foreign affairs	65
The environment	62
Corporate corruption	60
Immigration	55
Gun policy	53
Abortion	52
Same-sex marriage	44

Source: Gallup, February 2004

payments to people who are unemployed, poor, old or disabled), abortion and same-sex marriage were also prominent. Concerns about corporate corruption and immigration had climbed up the poll ratings, whereas worries about gun control, drugs, the death penalty and crime (long significant topics in the polls) had declined. This finding corresponds with an overall decreasing US crime rate in recent years.

In terms of more general attitudes to the state of the nation, a variety of polls in 2004, according to PollingReport, showed that a majority (between 61 and 62 per cent) of Americans reported dissatisfaction with the way things were going in the USA. Most polls also reported that many respondents (between 42 and 58 per cent) felt the country was on the wrong track. Only a minority of polls (such as *Time/CNN*) showed that a majority of respondents were either satisfied with the country's progress or thought that it was on the right track.

A Harris Feel Good Index in 2003 had also shown relatively small approval ratings, with 50 per cent of respondents feeling good about the state of the nation, 47 per cent feeling good about the morals and values of Americans in general, and 35 per cent feeling good about the nation's economy. Given the alleged optimism of Americans, their faith in their society and belief in an ability to achieve the American Dream, it is instructive to consider the results of polls which report on alienation in US society (see Table 1.2) between 2000 and 2003. These

TABLE 1.2 Alienation in the USA, 2000–3.

<i>Americans tend to feel that . . .</i>	2003	2002	2001	2000
. . . the rich get richer and the poor get poorer	69	72	69	69
. . . what you think doesn't count very much any more	56	55	49	56
. . . most people with power try to take advantage of people like yourself	60	61	48	59
. . . the people running the country don't really care what happens to you	46	44	36	53
. . . you're left out of things going on around you	40	30	33	39
<i>Percentage mean of responses to questions</i>	54	52	47	55

Source: adapted from Harris Alienation Index, the Harris Poll, December 2003

findings suggest a degree of powerlessness felt by ordinary Americans in the face of economic, political, bureaucratic, corporate and institutional forces.

In terms of the ethnic composition of the country, and given the considerable significance of original settlement and later immigration in US history over the centuries, attitudes to national identity and immigration appear to be shifting somewhat. The US Census 2000 Supplemental Survey found that when asked to describe their ancestry, more Americans trace their roots to Europe than anywhere else in the world (17 per cent German, 12 per cent Irish and 10 per cent British/English). But these three largest ancestral groups in fact saw their numbers decline by 20–5 per cent between the 1990 and 2000 censuses.

'American' or 'US' was the fourth largest ancestral identity. This finding from the census suggests that more people now identify themselves and their ethnic background as simply 'American' or 'US', without the need for a qualifying hyphen such as Irish-American. According to the *Christian Science Monitor* in June 2002, this does not represent a denial of roots but rather an increased sense of commonality, patriotism and American nationalism. But it is also argued that natural forces of assimilation, such as intermarriage, education and upward mobility, have weakened many Americans' bonds with their immigrant roots, particularly in the later generations. Newer immigrants retain stronger ancestral ties, while other groups, such as many African Americans, now seem more willing to employ both a hyphenated identity and an 'American' label, or even only the latter.

Nevertheless, tensions concerning ethnicity and immigration were shown in a *CBS News/New York Times* poll in January 2004 which found that 45 per cent of respondents believe legal immigration numbers should be reduced and only 16

per cent thought that they should be increased. This finding has been reflected in other polls and suggests that many Americans see legal immigration as a problem and believe that illegal immigration should be stopped. This might indicate that there is still a nativist current in American society which is at odds with the values of much of the country's political and economic leadership. The government, for example, accepts that skilled and unskilled immigration is necessary to support the economy and an ageing population.

Some critics argue that the meaning and definition of a more unified national and civic US identity remain elusive. They maintain that a candid debate about the essence of American identity is needed in the very fluid present situation. Opposed and partisan positions between the unifiers and the pluralists/multiculturalists still operate.

Many Americans may generally appear to believe in the inherent validity of American values, but they continue to question what is meant by these values, how consensual they are and, consequently, what it means to be American.

Exercises

Explain and examine the significance of the following names and terms.

slavery	individualism	rhetoric
populism	ethnic	anti-statism
diversity	consensus	corporate
grass roots	culture(s)	consumerism
America	frontier	salad bowl
utopianism	pluralism	assimilation
nativism	egalitarianism	Americanization
ideology	brand names	multiculturalism

Write short essays on the following questions:

1. What are some of the characteristics that you would associate with the American people and their society? Why?
2. Try to define the term 'social structure' and examine its possible usages.
3. Is the study of the major cultures an adequate way to approach American society?
4. Do you find that the public opinion poll findings in this chapter give a valid picture of American society? Give your reasons after carefully examining the poll results.

Further reading

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