

# Chapter 7: Citizen Participation in Democracy

## 4. Political Culture in the United States

Citizens and residents of the United States operate within a [political culture](#). This is a society's framework of shared values, beliefs, and attitudes concerning politics and government. It is the political environment in which Americans exercise their rights and responsibilities.

Political culture can take many forms and be expressed in many ways. The strong surge of patriotism after the 9/11 terrorist attacks of 2001 was an expression of American political culture. At the time, many Americans flew the flag to show their love of country. In quite a different way, the civil rights protests of the 1950s and 1960s were also an expression of American political culture. The millions of Americans who supported the civil rights movement shared the belief that all citizens should enjoy equal rights and opportunities.

### Americans' Shared Political Values

Although Americans often disagree on specific issues, they share a number of core beliefs and values. These beliefs, some of which are listed below, shape our political culture. Keep in mind that individuals may vary in terms of their attachment to these core values.

*Liberty.* Americans believe that they are entitled to the greatest amount of liberty possible as long as they do no harm to others. They firmly believe that citizens should be able to express their views openly, without fear of punishment by the government.

*Equality.* Americans embrace equality of opportunity, without regard to race, religion, or gender. They believe that all citizens should enjoy the right to vote, to receive an education, to have a job, and to succeed in life.

*Democracy.* Americans support a democratic system of government. They believe that political authority comes from the people and that public officials should be accountable to the voters. The importance of majority rule and the protection of minority rights are important related beliefs.

*Individualism.* Americans believe in personal freedom and personal responsibility. As a general rule, they believe that every citizen is responsible for his or her own actions and well-being. This contrasts with the more collective view in some countries, where greater emphasis is placed on the government's role in meeting people's needs.

*Free enterprise.* Americans support capitalism and a free-market economy in which private businesses compete with relatively limited regulation by government. They accept the fact that such a system creates winners and losers in terms of wealth and economic status.

*Justice and the rule of law.* Americans believe that society should be governed by a system of laws that are fairly and equally applied. They believe that the rights of ordinary citizens should not be arbitrarily restricted or infringed on by government.

*Patriotism.* Americans feel great pride and loyalty toward their country. Many believe that the United States is the greatest nation in the world. They also take pride in the values of American democracy.

*Optimism.* In general, Americans are upbeat and optimistic. They see themselves as "can-do" people. They tend to believe that their lives and life in general will be better in the future.

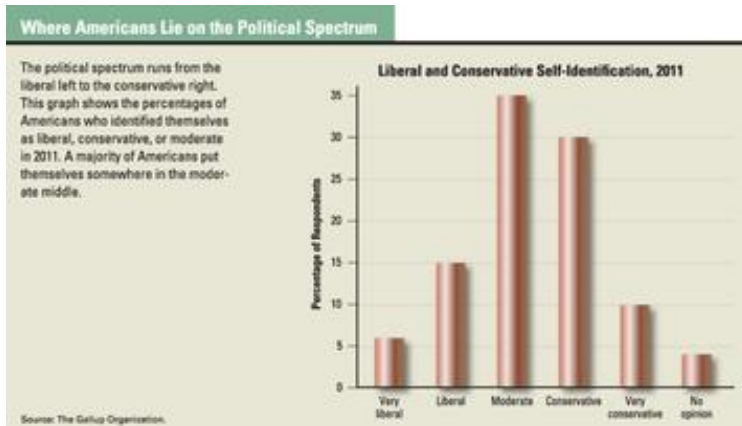
*Civic duty.* Americans believe that for democracy to flourish, citizens should vote and participate in civic and political affairs. Many also see volunteering for military service or giving back to their communities through volunteer activities as an aspect of civic duty.

### Two Widely Held Ideologies: Liberalism and Conservatism

Although Americans share a common political culture, they do not all hold to the same [ideology](#), or basic political beliefs. For example, they often disagree on the role government should play with respect to economic policy and moral values. The most widely held ideologies in U.S. politics today are held by Americans who define themselves as liberals or conservatives.

**Liberalism** is an ideology that favors an active role for the government in solving society's problems. Liberals generally support government efforts to regulate business and the economy. They support policies designed to reduce economic inequality and to help the poor. They also favor the use of government regulation to protect the environment and improve the health care system.

As their name suggests, liberals strongly defend liberty and resist government efforts to interfere in people's personal lives. On a political spectrum, with moderates in the middle, liberals are said to be "left of center." They tend to associate themselves with the Democratic Party.



themselves with the Republican Party.

Over the past few decades, more Americans have identified themselves as conservatives than as liberals. Since the late 1960s, the percentage of self-identified conservatives has varied from 30 to 40 percent. The percentage of people calling themselves liberal has remained more constant, at around 20 percent. This graph compares the percentages of liberals, conservatives, and moderates in 2011.

### Three Other Ideologies: Socialism, Libertarianism, and Environmentalism

Three other ideologies—socialism, **libertarianism**, and **environmentalism**—also play a role in American politics. Although these ideologies have fewer followers than liberalism and conservatism, they have inspired and motivated many people over the years.

**Socialism.** The oldest of these ideologies is socialism. The main goal of socialism is to limit economic inequality by ensuring a fair distribution of wealth. In a socialist system, the government owns or controls most of the economic resources needed for the production of goods and services. In theory, a socialist government manages the economy in a way that benefits the majority of citizens.



In 1901, reformers and workers who believed in socialism formed the Socialist Party of America. The party's greatest electoral success came in 1912 when its presidential candidate, Eugene Debs, won nearly a million votes. That was just 6 percent of the total votes cast, but it was a substantial showing for a socialist candidate. After World War I, however, membership in the Socialist Party declined.

Socialism never became as popular in the United States as it did in other countries, in part because it conflicted with America's political culture. A strong faith in capitalism and the free enterprise system made most Americans leery of socialists' call for government control of economic resources.

Most American socialists today support what is known as **democratic socialism**. This is an ideology that advocates socialism as a basis for the economy and democracy as a governing principle. In countries that have adopted this ideology, elected leaders supervise a "mixed economy" of public and private industry.

**Libertarianism.** Modern libertarianism is an ideology based on a strong belief in personal freedom. A 2012 statement of libertarian principles began with these words:

**Conservatism**, on the other hand, is an ideology that calls for a limited role for government in economic affairs. Conservatives generally oppose government regulation of business. Most want to limit the size of government, reduce taxes, and cut back on government programs. Instead, they look to private initiative, or efforts by nongovernmental groups such as religious congregations, charities, service organizations, and businesses, to deal with many of society's problems.

In contrast to liberals, conservatives are more likely to support government action on moral issues. Conservatives are said to be "right of center" on the political spectrum. They generally associate

*As Libertarians, we seek a world of liberty; a world in which all individuals are sovereign over their own lives and no one is forced to sacrifice his or her values for the benefit of others.*

—National Platform of the Libertarian Party, 2012

Libertarians tend to be conservative on economic issues and liberal on social issues. For example, they favor lower taxes and a free-market economy, while opposing bans on abortion or gay marriage. Libertarians want a small government and resist government regulation of any kind.

Formed in 1971, the Libertarian Party has attracted a small but loyal following. According to Pew Research Center, 9 percent of Americans had libertarian beliefs in 2011. Libertarian candidates regularly run for office in local, state, and national elections. So far their success has been limited to the local level, where they have won election to such positions as mayor, city council member, and sheriff.

**Environmentalism.** This last ideology, environmentalism, unites Americans who are deeply concerned about conservation and protection of the environment. Environmentalists advocate policies designed to reduce pollution and preserve natural resources. In contrast to libertarians, they support government regulation of industry and the economy to achieve those ends.

Many members of conservation organizations such as the Sierra Club and Friends of the Earth identify themselves as environmentalists. So do members of the Green Party of the United States. “Greens” are committed to what they call “ecological and economic sustainability.” By this they mean meeting the needs of the world’s people today without damaging the ability of future generations to provide for themselves. As their party platform states,

*We support a sustainable society which utilizes resources in such a way that future generations will benefit and not suffer from the practices of our generation. To this end we must practice agriculture which replenishes the soil; move to an energy efficient economy; and live in ways that respect the integrity of natural systems.*

—Green Party of the United States Platform, 2012

Like the Libertarian Party, the Green Party has been most successful in electing candidates at the local level. The party is stronger in Europe, however, and has won national offices in a number of countries.



*“Harold, would you say you are left of center, right of center, center, left of left, right of left, left of right, or right of right, or what?”*

### **The Moderates in the Middle: Centrism**

Most Americans don't fit neatly into any ideological camp. They consider themselves moderates, or middle-of-the-road voters. These are people who sit at the center of the political spectrum, between the ideologies of left and right. In recent years, U.S. politics have become more polarized, meaning that political parties have adopted more extreme policies. The Republican Party has grown more conservative, and the Democratic Party more liberal. This polarization is especially evident in the current Congress, which remains divided on a number of issues.

These strong divisions often push voters to be drawn to [centrism](#). Many surveys show that moderates, along with people who describe themselves as slightly conservative or slightly liberal, make up the largest group of U.S. voters.

In contrast to people with a strong ideological point of view, centrists may hold a mix of liberal, conservative, and perhaps environmental views. Centrism is not an ideology with its own political party. As a result, during election time, centrists often cross party lines, depending on the

candidates and issues of the day.

## **5. How Americans Engage in Civic Life**

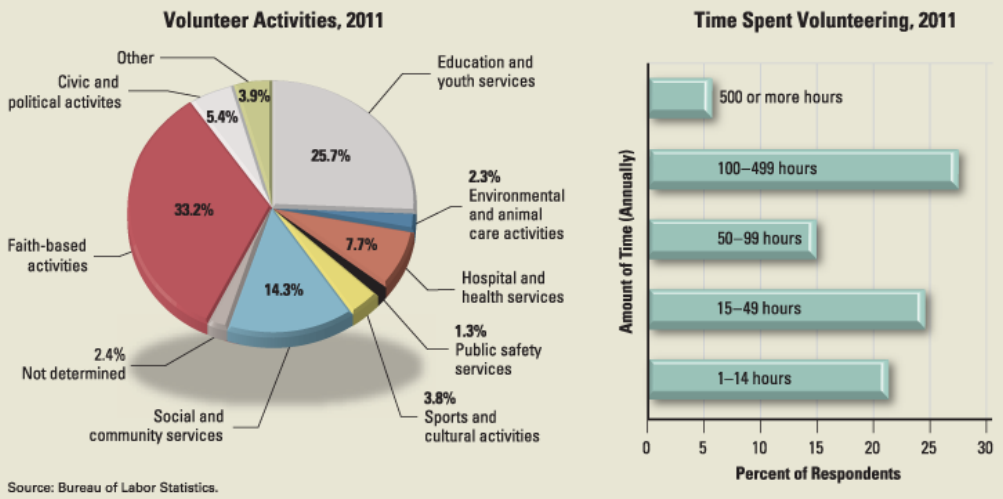
For most Americans, voting is the first thing that comes to mind when they hear the words “civic duty.” In a democracy, voting is one of the most basic and important ways to engage in civic life.

There are many other ways to be an active citizen, however. You can read newspapers or watch the news on television to stay informed about current events. You can talk to friends about political issues or put a political bumper sticker on your

car to demonstrate your support. You can become a volunteer with a community group or follow a political figure using social media. By doing any of these things, you are engaging in civic life.

## Volunteering in the United States

Americans who volunteer their time do so in various types of activities. Just over a third volunteer mainly through religious organizations. Over 30 percent of volunteers devote 100 hours or more a year to volunteer activities.



### Civil Society: The “Social Capital” of Democracy

At the start of this chapter, you read about Robert D. Putnam’s work on civic engagement. Putnam concluded that Americans today are less likely to participate in civic associations than they were in the past. He further believes that such participation is crucial to democracy.

Putnam argues that social clubs and civic organizations are building blocks of what political scientists call [civil society](#). This term refers to a middle layer of voluntary associations and

institutions that exists between government on the one hand and individuals and families on the other.

Many political scientists argue that a strong civil society is essential in a democracy. The organizations that make up civil society, they point out, are nourished by citizen involvement. This involvement helps to expand a society’s [social capital](#). Putnam defines social capital as “connections among individuals” that are forged through their participation in voluntary associations.

To understand how social capital works, consider this simple example. In many communities, parents of school-age children join the local Parent Teacher Association. Through their PTA, parents work together to improve their children’s schools.

While working on PTA projects, parents form new social networks and exchange information about their community. Through these networks, they may create new groups to work on other local issues. In this way, the connections forged within the PTA help to generate new energy and ideas that benefit the larger community. This is social capital in action.

Of course, the PTA is only one of thousands of volunteer organizations that one might choose to join. As the graphs above show, Americans get involved in many types of volunteer activities and for varying amounts of time. All of these efforts help to strengthen civil society and build social capital.

### Putting Social Capital to Work in Texas

Social capital promotes civic engagement not only in local communities, but also in state and national affairs. Such was the case in Texas in 2006 when various citizen groups rose up to oppose the construction of new coal-fired power plants across the state. Coal is a fossil fuel that produces large amounts of air pollution and greenhouse gases. The power company that planned to build these plants assured the public that they would not pollute the air. But many Texans believed otherwise.

The first protests against the power company’s plan were organized by citizens living in communities where the new plants were to be built. They argued that the coal-burning plants would harm air quality and give rise to health problems.

As opposition grew, local business leaders began to get involved in the issue. They feared that increased pollution from the plants would harm local economies by discouraging tourism and other business activity. Local public officials—including the mayors of Dallas, Houston, and other cities—began to voice their concerns.

In time, local protest groups banded together to form larger organizations with names like Stop the Coal Rush, the Texas Clean Sky Coalition, and Texas Business for Clean Air. Civic activists sent e-mails and letters to newspapers and public officials. They attended hearings to oppose the power company's application for building permits. They also created Web sites and held fundraisers to raise money and get their message out.

These efforts peaked in February 2007 with a large rally at the state capitol in Austin. The next day, activists met with their state representatives and other public officials to argue their case. Before lawmakers could act, however, the company that was planning to build the power plants announced that it was being sold.



The organized efforts of Texans to stop the new power plants from being built were nonetheless effective. The new buyers of the power company immediately announced their intention to scale back the project and explore alternatives to building more coal-fired power plants.

### Four Categories of Civic Engagement: Which One Fits You?

As the Texas story illustrates, civic engagement can have a real impact, especially when people work together toward common goals. But just how engaged are most Americans?

To answer that question, political scientists survey Americans about their civic and political activities. Using those data, scholars at the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) have determined that most people fall into one of four broad categories of civic engagement.

*Electoral specialists.* This category includes those whose main engagement is through the election process. People in this group vote, volunteer in political campaigns, and try to persuade others to vote as well.

*Civic specialists.* People in this group focus on improving their communities and helping others. They join local civic groups, support nonprofit organizations, and take part in fundraising activities for worthy causes.

*Dual activists.* This category is made up of people who engage in both electoral and civic activities. They may be found passing out leaflets in a political campaign one day and volunteering in a homeless shelter the next.

*The disengaged.* This group is made up of people who are not significantly engaged in civic life. They don't vote or pay attention to civic affairs.

The graph shows that Americans young and old fall into all four groups. What about you? Which category best matches your level of civic engagement? And are you satisfied with your answer?

#### Forms of Civic Engagement

Civic engagement takes many forms, from writing letters to organizing protests. These photographs illustrate just some of the ways citizens can make their voices heard.

**Attend a Public Meeting**  
Find out what's going on in your community by attending a public meeting. You might be surprised to discover how many decisions affecting your life are made close to home.

**Volunteer in a Political Campaign**  
Get involved in a political campaign. Share the excitement of election night as volunteers wait for the votes to be counted.

**Circulate a Petition**  
Take part in a petition drive for a cause you care about. Often you can even sign a petition online.

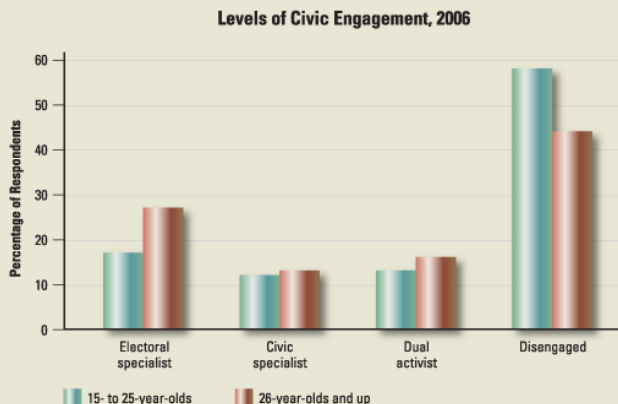
**Organize a Fundraiser**  
Raise money for a worthy cause. The challenge is to help people feel good about both asking for donations and giving them.

**Organize a Demonstration**  
Put your passion to work by organizing a demonstration. Sometimes actions really do speak louder than words.

**Get Involved in a Service Project**  
Find a way to give back to your community. You will feel good about yourself while making a difference.

### Categories of Civic Engagement

Political scientists at CIRCLE, the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, have classified people into four broad categories of civic engagement. As this graph shows, civic engagement increases with age.



Source: Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, [www.civicyouth.org](http://www.civicyouth.org).