



# American Civilization

## An Introduction

DAVID MAUK, ALF TOMAS TØNNESSEN AND JOHN OAKLAND

8TH EDITION



# American Civilization

The eighth edition of the hugely successful *American Civilization* offers students the perfect background and introductory information on contemporary American life, examining the central dimensions of American society from geography and the environment to government and politics, religion, education, sports, media and the arts.

Fully and comprehensively updated throughout with regard to events, processes, attitudes and major figures in society, culture and politics in the United States, this new edition brings the book up to date through:

- coverage of recent events, including the 2020 US election and 2021 presidential inauguration;
- revised chapters on geography, women and minorities, and the media that incorporate more information on such themes as environmental legislation, the LGBTQ+ community, social media and people, all key themes in the study of American culture and society;
- the introduction of “topical studies” that connect small case studies to apposite illustrations to highlight key subjects within the field; and
- the inclusion of more discussion questions that require analysis and the use of evidence to substantiate argumentation to enable students to develop their own essay responses to typical questions they may be asked.



Supported by exercises and suggestions for further reading at the end of each chapter, a substantial chronology that covers key events in the history of the United States and a fully integrated companion website ([www.routledge.com/cw/mauk](http://www.routledge.com/cw/mauk)), the textbook remains an essential introduction to American civilization, culture and society for American Studies students.

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# **American Civilization**

## *An Introduction*

8th edition

**David Mauk, Alf Tomas Tønnessen and  
John Oakland**

Eighth edition published 2022  
by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN  
and by Routledge  
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

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First edition published by Routledge 1995  
Seventh edition published by Routledge 2017

*British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

A catalog record has been requested for this book

ISBN: 978-0-367-62095-0 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-367-62094-3 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-10793-4 (ebk)

Typeset in Berling  
by Apex CoVantage, LLC

Access the companion website: [www.routledge.com/cw/mauk](http://www.routledge.com/cw/mauk)

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# Preface and acknowledgments

This book examines central cultural structures of American (US) civilization, such as politics and government, the law, the economy, social services, the media, education, religion and the arts. Chapters on the country and the people also emphasize environmental concerns and the geographical and human diversity of the US. Several chapters use opinion polls to indicate the different attitudes of Americans about the society in which they live and operate.

The book combines descriptive and analytical approaches within a historical context and examines recent debates and developments in the US. The format of the book is intended to encourage students and teachers to decide their own study needs, assess personal responses to American society and engage in critical discussion. Exercises in each chapter can be approached from material in the text. Additional information may be found in lists of relevant websites and “further reading” sections in each chapter, as well as two reference dictionaries (Alicia Duchak, *A–Z of Modern America*, London: Routledge, 1999, and Jonathan Crowther, *Oxford Guide to British and American Culture*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

A book of this type is indebted for many of its ideas, opinions, facts and statistics to a range of reference sources, for which a general acknowledgment is made (see also the “further reading” sections). Particular thanks are due to opinion polls and media, such as Gallup, Harris, Pew Research Center, the *Economist*, YouGov, CNN, *USA Today*, Fox News, CBS, NBC, ABC, PRRI (Public Religion Research Institute), *Time*, the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Washington Post*.

The term “billion” in this book follows the internationally approved standard – that is, 1,000,000,000.



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# Chronology of significant dates in American history

20,000–12,000 BC	Asian and Mediterranean peoples migrated to the Americas.
c. 3000–2600	Mayan civilization flourished in Central America.
c. AD 350–1250	Anasazi built pueblo “apartment” complexes in the American Southwest.
1001	Vikings established “Vineland” settlement in Newfoundland.
1050–1250	Mississippian culture dominated the midwestern and southeastern United States.
1300s	Aztec civilization rose in Mexico.
1492	Columbus came ashore in the Bahama Islands.
1492–1542	European explorers visited and mapped parts of the Americas.
1497	Europeans began fishing in the Great Banks off the East Coast of North America.
1519–21	Hernán Cortéz invaded and conquered Mexico.
1518–1620	Smallpox and other European diseases decimated Native Americans.
1607	Jamestown, Virginia, settlement established.
1619	The first African workers arrived in Virginia, but not as slaves.
1622	Native Americans and Virginians waged war.
1620–30	Pilgrims and then Puritans founded the New England colonies.
1637	Native Americans and Puritans waged war.
1624–81	New Amsterdam (New York), Maryland, New Sweden, Carolina, New Jersey and Pennsylvania were founded.

1636, 1647	Harvard College and then public schools started in Massachusetts.
1680–1776	First wave of non-English immigrants arrived in the North American colonies.
1732	Georgia, the last of the 13 English colonies, was founded.
1730s–1740s	Religious ferment reached a peak during the First Great Awakening.
1757	New Yorkers rioted against British policies.
1770	British troops fired on Boston protesters.
1775, 1776	American Revolution began; Declaration of Independence was published.
1783	The Treaty of Paris recognized the independence of the United States and granted it the territory south of Canada to the Mississippi River.
1787	Strong federal government under the US Constitution replaced the loose league of states under the Articles of Confederation.
1789	George Washington took office as president; Federalists and Anti-Federalists competed in Congress.
1792	New York Stock Exchange opened.
1803	Louisiana Purchase from France added a huge slice of the continent's midsection to the US; US Supreme Court claimed the power to declare laws unconstitutional.
1808	Congress outlawed the import of African slaves.
1810	New York passed Philadelphia in population at third US census.
1808–13	Shawnee leaders, Tecumseh and the Prophet, organized the eastern tribes to resist US expansion beyond the Appalachians.
1812–15	The US won no major battle in the War of 1812 with Britain on American soil.
1815–25	Industrialization started in the New England and Mid-Atlantic states.
1820s–1840s	Religious revival swept across the frontier in the Second Great Awakening; social and utopian reform movements spread.
1820s–1880s	About 16 million Europeans and smaller numbers of Asians and Latinos immigrated in the second wave.
1825	Opening the Erie Canal secured the economic power of the East.

1831–38	Native Americans were removed from the South along the Trail of Tears to Indian Territory in Oklahoma.
1830s	Democratic Party emerged and competed with the Whigs.
1845–48	Conflict and war with Mexico; annexation of Texas, California and the Southwest.
1848	First women's rights convention at Seneca Falls, New York.
1850s	Anti-foreign "nativist," abolitionist and pro-slavery movements dominated US politics; Republican Party emerged.
1861–65	Civil War raged over slavery and states' rights.
1862	Homestead Act granted land to people who live on and farm it for five years, spurring massive settlement of the inland West.
1865–75	Constitutional amendments and a civil rights act were passed to secure the citizenship and rights of former slaves.
1877	Reconstruction of the South ended; southern race laws progressively denied blacks rights in the 1880s and 1890s.
1869, 1882–83	Transcontinental railroads completed.
1890	"Battle" of Wounded Knee ended centuries of open warfare against Native Americans; US Census Bureau announced the "closing of the frontier."
1890–1930	About 23 million "third wave" immigrants arrived, mostly from southern and eastern Europe but also from Asia, Canada and Latin America.
1898	Anti-imperialist debate in Congress; Spanish-American War.
1890–1920	Progressive Era reformed social institutions, politics and government.
1917–18	America fought alongside the Allies in the First World War.
1919	First tabloid newspaper, the <i>New York Daily News</i> , appeared.
1919–33	Prohibition of alcoholic beverages became the law under the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution (repealed by the Twenty-First Amendment).
1920	Women won the right to vote through the Nineteenth Amendment.



1921	Red Scare and general restriction of immigration started.
1929	Wall Street stock market crash signaled the start of the Great Depression; size of the House of Representatives set at 435.
1920s–1940s	Hollywood’s classic period of film production.
1920s–1970s	Progressively more of the Bill of Rights applied to state law and cases.
1932	Franklin D. Roosevelt elected president and implemented the New Deal to bring the US out of the Great Depression.
1937	Supreme Court accepted New Deal powers of federal government.
1939	Commercial television introduced at the World’s Fair in New York.
1941	On December 7, Japan bombed the Pearl Harbor naval base in Hawaii, and the US entered the Second World War.
1946	Post-war baby boom began.
1947	National Security Act transformed American government for the Cold War; Truman Doctrine set path of US foreign policy.
1950–53	McCarthy-era “Red Scare” and Korean War.
1954	Racial desegregation began with the <i>Brown v. Board of Education</i> US Supreme Court decision.
1955	American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) combined in a union of US unions.
1958	National Defense Education Act funded scientific competition with the USSR.
1953–74	US involvement and war in Vietnam, massive protests at home and abroad against the war in the 1960s; African Americans, Native Americans, Chicanos, women and gay Americans fought for civil rights.
1963	President John F. Kennedy assassinated; Lyndon B. Johnson assumed the presidency.
1960s	Great Society and War on Poverty social reforms; high point of youth “counterculture” and religious ecumenism in the US.
1964	Civil Rights Act outlawed discrimination in housing and jobs.
1965	Voting Rights Act protected voter registration, especially in the South; Elementary and Secondary Education Act provided massive funding for education reform.

1968	Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy assassinated; 168 cities erupted in race riots.
1969	Stonewall Riots occurred, when gay men fought back after repeated police raids.
1966–2012	Continuing fourth wave of immigration, involving over 38.5 million people, mostly from Latin America and Asia but also from the former USSR, Africa and the Middle East.
1970	More Americans lived in suburbs than in cities or rural areas.
1972	Nixon's "New Federalism" began the return of power to the states.
1973	<i>Roe v. Wade</i> decision legalized limited abortion rights for women.
1974	President Nixon resigned because of the Watergate scandal.
1981	AIDS first identified in the US.
1970s–1980s	Rise of Christian fundamentalism and conservative religious political activity.
1986–88	Mikhail Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan cooperated to bring an end to the Cold War; Iran-Contra scandal cast a shadow over the second Reagan administration; George H. W. Bush won the presidency.
1991	US led the Persian Gulf War to drive Iraq out of Kuwait.
1993–2001	President Clinton presided over the longest economic boom in US history.
1996	Devolution of policymaking power to the states occurred through the Welfare Reform Act.
1999	Congress impeached, but did not convict, President Clinton.
2000	George W. Bush won the presidential election after a 5–4 divided decision of the US Supreme Court stopped Florida vote recounts and called for uniform vote counting procedures.
2001	No Child Left Behind Act set in action the most far-reaching national educational reform since the 1960s; terrorists destroyed the World Trade Center and attacked the Pentagon, and the US initiated a global war on terrorism in Afghanistan.
2002	Help America Vote Act was passed to standardize voting procedures within states; the Patriot Act and the authorization of the Department of Homeland Security transformed the American government for the war on terrorism.

- 2003 US-led “coalition of the willing” invaded and occupied Iraq; Supreme Court decision *Lawrence v. Texas* ended the criminalization of homosexual relations between consenting adults.
- 2004 No weapons of mass destruction found in Iraq; George W. Bush won a second term and Republicans secured larger majorities in Congress.
- 2006–13 Legal immigration to the US capped at 675,000 immigrant visas a year.
- 2006–8 In the longest and most expensive presidential election in US history Barack Obama, the first immigrant, mixed-race African American to run for president, won. In *District of Columbia v. Heller*, the Supreme Court decided the ban on the private possession of handguns in Washington, DC, was an infringement of the Second Amendment. The Great Recession became the worst financial breakdown since the 1930s.
- 2009–10 The Obama administration rescued Wall Street and the Detroit automobile industry, extended unemployment insurance and initiated a jobs and economic stimulus package.
- 2010 In *Citizens United v. the FEC*, the Supreme Court ruled that corporations have the same right to freedom of expression as individuals regarding campaign contributions. The Patient Protection and Affordable Health Care Act (PPACA) passed with no support from Republican members of Congress. The act was upheld by the Supreme Court in 2012.
- 2012 Obama won an Electoral College and popular vote victory. In congressional elections, Democrats improved their majority in the Senate, but Republicans kept a majority in the House. SMS declined and gave way to smartphones and social networking sites, such as Facebook and Twitter.
- 2013 Another school mass killing occurred at Newtown, Connecticut. Two Chechen immigrant brothers exploded bombs at the Boston Marathon. The Black Lives Matter movement against racism in the US justice system began.

- 2014 In a midterm election landslide, Republicans gained control of the Senate and increased their majority in the House of Representatives.  
Support for the Black Lives Matter movement increased after a policeman in Ferguson, Missouri, shot and killed an unarmed black teenager, leading to riots that spread across the nation.  
Fracking to extract shale oil said to cause thousands of earthquakes in Oklahoma and across the US.
- 2015 Supreme Court ruled that same-sex marriage is constitutional. Bipartisan majorities in Congress and President Obama enacted a new federal education law, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).
- 2016 US signed the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) with 11 other Pacific Rim countries.  
US ratified the Paris Agreement on Climate Change.  
The Standing Rock Sioux Reservation successfully protested the building of the Dakota Access Pipeline.  
After a highly contentious presidential campaign, intelligence reports accused Russia of interfering in the election in Donald Trump's favor.  
Trump won an Electoral College victory even though Hillary Clinton won the popular vote by 3 million.
- 2017 President Trump withdrew the US from the TPP.  
The US reevaluated the Patient Protection and Affordable Health Care Act of 2012.  
The Tax Cuts and Jobs Act (TCJA) was enacted providing some tax relief for almost everyone but most for large businesses and very wealthy individuals.
- 2019 Trump impeached by the House of Representatives for abuse of power and obstruction of Congress.
- 2020 The US reported its first death due to COVID-19 on February 29 in Seattle.  
Kamala Harris elected the first female vice president in the US.
- 2021 On January 6, a violent mob, encouraged by President Trump, stormed Congress, resulting in the deaths of five individuals. Trump impeached for a second time.  
COVID deaths rose to over 600,000. The US passed the largest economic relief and stimulus law since the Great Depression of the 1930s.



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# The American context

- Ethnic culture
- Religious culture
- Political-legal culture
- Economic culture
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This chapter examines foreign and domestic attitudes to the US and places the country within historical contexts. It describes six cultures (social building blocks or structures defined by beliefs, ideas and behavior) that have created an American civilization over time and continue to influence debates about national identity, values and institutional change.

The term “American civilization” describes an advanced society which occupies a specific geographical space (the US) and has been settled historically by many different peoples. Its contributory cultures illustrate a distinctive, but complex, way of life. Although previously associated with notions of superiority and imperialism, “civilization” generally now has a neutral and inclusive meaning.

Central features have conditioned US history, such as:

- pre-Columbian (1492) migrations of peoples to the Americas from worldwide origins; colonial and military occupation by Europeans from the late fifteenth century; global mass immigration in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; and the establishment of social values, religious faiths and institutional structures;
- the treatment of Native Americans and other minority ethnic groups such as African and Asian Americans as well as Muslims and Jews;
- the War of Independence from Britain (1775–83);
- the westward, southern and northern expansion of the new nation;
- principles of dignity and rights to freedom, justice and opportunity in the Declaration of Independence (1776), the Constitution (1787) and the Bill of Rights (1791);
- ideologies of egalitarianism, individualism and utopianism;
- massive immigration from Europe, Latin America and Asia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries;
- industrial growth in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries;
- the Civil War to end slavery and southern-state secession from the Union (1861–65);
- the development of capitalism with its corporate management and business models;
- increasing government regulation and bureaucracies;
- US isolationist and interventionist attitudes toward other countries during two world wars (1914–18 and 1939–45), the 1945–89 Cold War and the early twenty-first century
- growth of the US as a dominant economic, military and cultural force since the late nineteenth century;

- the influence of contemporary globalization (worldwide interdependent economic, political and cultural forces) and nationalistic popularism (a resurgence of protectionist public attitudes) on both the US and other nations;
- the current international status of the US as it responds to external and internal pressures and considers a more self-interested identity; and
- the many lives lost and unprecedented economic damage wrought by the novel coronavirus pandemic and the nation's flawed responses to it.

These (and other) historical events have created six major cultures in the US, which may conflict with each other and operate on different levels of idealism, pragmatism and rhetoric. The first is a diverse (and often contentious) ethnic culture founded on Native American civilizations, European colonial settlement, African American slavery and later waves of immigration. The second is a multi-faith (pluralist) religious culture, which reflects the beliefs of early inhabitants, later immigrants and contemporary religious movements. The third is a political-legal culture based on individualism, constitutionalism and respect for the law. It tries to unite the people under ideal versions of "Americanism," such as patriotism, egalitarianism and morality, which are meant to be reflected in political and legal institutions. In recent decades political polarization into adamantly opposed Republican and Democratic camps has inhibited the functioning of political-legal



**PLATE 1.1** British forces surrender to American and French armies, Yorktown, Virginia, 1781, in this painting by John Turnbull. The American general, Lincoln, riding a white horse, extends his hand toward the sword carried by the British general, O'Hara, who is on foot. The American War of Independence (1775–83) was effectively decided by this victory, resulting in the loss of 13 British colonies.

Source: FineArt/Alamy Stock Photo



culture. The fourth is an economic and consumer culture of corporate and individual competition and production, which encourages profit and the consumption of goods and services based on principles of supply and demand. The fifth consists of media cultures (information, communication and entertainment), which became diverse and technologically complex with the rise of social media and alternative media universes in the twenty-first century. The sixth represents cultural expression in the arts, sports and leisure, which reflects the physical vitality and intellectual inventiveness of US life.

US society has been conditioned by these cultures. Their presence may be generally acknowledged; however, considerable numbers of people – such as political activists, youth, the disadvantaged and minorities – may be alienated from them. Conflicts about assumed national values and unity have occurred throughout US history. A large number of varied topics – including racism, climate change, polarization, gender roles, socioeconomic inequality, international alliances, military intervention, abortion, LGBTQ issues, immigration, national identity, ethnicity, social change and the roles of federal and state governments – are sources of contemporary debate.

Nevertheless, since the Declaration of Independence in 1776, the major cultures have collectively created what is seen as a national identity in the US for the



**PLATE 1.2** Slave quarters at George Washington's estate, Mount Vernon, Virginia. Washington was the victorious army commander of the American independence campaign and the first president of the US. Like other large landowners, he owned black slaves to harvest and sustain his fields. As here, they lived in barrack-type buildings on the estate.

*Source: Jordan Oakland*

majority of its inhabitants. The difficulty lies in determining what this consists of in practice and how much cultural dissent from perceived norms exists.

People inside and outside the US have very varied and conflicting views about the country and its inhabitants. Some opinions are based on quantifiable facts. Others are formed by ideology, hatred, prejudice or envy. Many American self-images often stress the nation's supposed "exceptionalism" (its alleged unique mission in the world, idealism, aspirations and sense of destiny). But there are also internal disagreements about the country's values, institutions, policies and national identity and whether its vaunted ideals equate with American reality. US society is divided politically, religiously, socially, economically and ethnically, although efforts are made to reconcile differences and unify the people under common beliefs and structures.

Opinion polls report that, under the impetus of national and international events, Americans alternate between feelings of positivism and dissatisfaction about their country. Periods of doubt and conflict, such as during the War of



**PLATE 1.3** *Let Us Have Peace, 1865* by Jean Leon Gerome Ferris, depicting the Confederate Civil War general, Robert E. Lee, signing surrender documents before the Union general, Ulysses S. Grant, in the parlor of the McLean House (Appomattox Court House) on April 9, 1865, effectively ending the American Civil War.

Source: Bridgeman Images

Independence (1775–83), the Civil War (1861–65), the world wars (1914–18 and 1939–45), the Great Depression (1930s), the Cold War (1945–89), the civil rights campaigns (1950s–1960s), the Vietnam War (1960s–1975), the Iraq War (2003–9) with its chaotic aftermath, the Afghanistan conflict (2001–20), and struggles against terrorism and current left- and right-wing protests and disturbances, have often resulted in adaptation and renewal.

During the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, US public attitudes were very much conditioned by threat of infectious diseases. Nearly 4 in 5 Americans who responded to a PEW Research Center survey in April 2020 asserted that contagious illness was the most serious threat facing the nation. Respondents to the poll ranked the following in order of seriousness as major threats to world stability and US interests: the spread of infectious diseases (79 percent), terrorism (73 percent), the spread of nuclear weapons (73 percent), cyberattacks from other countries (72 percent), China's power and influence (62 percent), global climate change (60 percent), Russia's power and influence (56 percent), the condition of the global economy (55 percent) and global poverty (49 percent). Other threats Americans specified were global migration and long-standing conflicts between countries or ethnic groups.

## Ethnic culture

US ethnic culture (see Chapters 2, 3 and 4) reflects the diverse origins of the population. After earlier Native American and Viking immigration, Christopher Columbus's 1492 arrival in the Caribbean encouraged Spanish soldiers, missionaries, adventurers and traders to begin a European settlement of south-central North America, such as the founding of St. Augustine in 1565 on the Florida coast and Santa Fe (1609) and Albuquerque (1706) in New Mexico. Colonial settlement after 1607 was largely composed of British arrivals, who shared North America with Native American communities, the Spanish and the French. Until 1776, over half the population came from the British Isles and contributed to a white, mainly Anglo-American, Protestant culture. They promoted many of the new nation's political, social, constitutional and religious institutions. Their political principles were based on democracy, independence of the people and skepticism about government. Their values were conditioned by a belief in individualism, a Protestant work ethic (working hard in this life to be rewarded here and in the next) and the rule of law (legal rules applicable to all persons and institutions). Other European settlers, such as Germans, Swedes and the Dutch, slowly contributed to this ethnic mix as a mainstream American identity gradually evolved.

After the colonial period and American independence from Britain (1776), northwestern Europe supplied over two-thirds of US immigration for most of the nineteenth century. There were also many Asian immigrants (particularly





**PLATE 1.4** The twin towers of the World Trade Center, in New York City, were destroyed by plane attacks on September 11, 2001. They have been replaced by a Memorial Plaza, fountains, museums and the Freedom Tower sited on One World Trade Center. Similar memorials commemorate attacks on the Pentagon.

*Source: JOHN KELLERMAN/Alamy Stock Photo*

Chinese) during this time. At the end of the century, there was a shift toward newcomers from southern and eastern Europe. Much of this immigration was neither Anglo by descent nor Protestant in religion, and it altered the demographic composition of the country. Despite immigration restrictions, the twentieth century saw a variety of other nationalities from worldwide origins immigrating to the US, and some 60 million immigrants entered the US between 1820 and 2000. From the 1980s into the early twenty-first century, immigrants came from Africa, Asia, South and Central America and the Caribbean, with the biggest groups being Latinos and Asians.

Immigrants to the US have often been analyzed in terms of “ancestral groups.” An American Community Survey (ACS), 2008, reported that more Americans traced their roots to Europe than to anywhere else in the world. But non-European ancestries were also self-identified in 2008, such as African American, American, Mexican, West Indian, French Canadian and Native American. “American” refers to people who felt they had no ancestry outside the United States and were not Native Americans (Indians). Although ancestral claims *could* be vague, subjective or demographically weak and individuals might claim more than one identity, agencies (but not the US Census Bureau) continue to construct “ancestry” lists (see Table 1.1).

The effects of colonial settlement, importation of African slaves (from 1641) and later immigration on US culture have been substantial. This background

**TABLE 1.1** Ten largest “ancestries” in the United States, 2017

<i>“Ancestries”</i>	<i>Number</i>
Total US population	325,719,178
German	43,093,766
Irish	31,497,232
English	23,074,947
American*	20,174,230
Italian	16,650,674
Polish	9,012,085
French	7,763,019
Scottish	5,399,371
Norwegian	4,295,981
Dutch	3,906,193

\*“American” refers to people who felt they had no ancestry outside the United States and were not Native Americans (Indians).

Source: American Community Survey (ACS), 2017, 1-year estimate

(inclusive of Native Americans) is different from that of most other nations, arguably defines American history as special, and provides the US with a distinct and ethnically based identity.

The US Census Bureau report estimated in June 2019 that the nation's population of 331 million consisted of six groupings: Latino (55.4 million); African American (45.7 million); Asian (20.3 million); American Indian and Alaska Natives (6.5 million); Native Hawaiians and Other Pacific Islanders (1.5 million); and White (197.9 million). Millennials (those born between 1982 and 2000) numbered 83.1 million of the country's population, exceeding that of the earlier 75.4 million baby boomers.

A US Census Bureau report in 2019 estimated that whites were a decreasing 53 percent of the total population (from 63.7 percent in 2010) and Latinos would increase to 28 percent of the population by 2050, when non-whites and Latinos together will account for 54 percent of the population and whites will be 46.3 percent (dropping to 43 percent by 2060). African Americans will form 14.4 percent of the population by 2050, and Asian Americans will be 7.7 percent. The population is becoming more racially and ethnically mixed, at a time when whites are becoming a minority ethnic group for the first time in US history. These changes result from immigration, higher birth rates among some ethnic minorities, intermingling of ethnic groups and an aging white population with lower birth rates. They will increasingly influence US social, economic and political life.

Native Americans, immigrants and imported black African slaves have considerably affected public life throughout US history. They have also experienced great difficulties integrating into the host society. Conflicts and racial tensions between settled groups, Native Americans, African Americans and immigrants have sometimes erupted into violence. These factors have revealed nativism (discrimination toward others by the existing population) and racism in many areas of American life, often in institutionalized form.

Ethnic diversity has brought advantages and disadvantages over time. It has also gradually reduced the dominance of the original Anglo-American Protestant culture, which had to take account of a growing social pluralism. It is argued that the US has historically managed to integrate its immigrants successfully into the existing society at varying levels, and newcomers have generally adapted to American life. However, despite significant structural and cultural improvement from the 1950s, racial and ethnic divisions still continue to affect American society in both covert (indirect) and overt (direct) forms, attitudes to immigration remain volatile, opinions about the existence of racism in the US vary considerably between blacks and whites, minorities in polls admit to being racially prejudiced, and blacks and whites arguably still largely live in separate worlds.

When asked whether blacks and minorities receive equal treatment to whites in the criminal justice system, 54 percent of all respondents said no. The individual figures were 89 percent for African Americans, 60 percent for Latinos and 44 percent for whites. The US is divided between blacks/Latinos and whites

on racial issues and between white Democrats and Republicans over issues of race and justice. For example, a Pew Research Center Poll in 2018 reported that 49 percent of all American whites saw no racism around them and felt there was no unfair treatment of blacks in many social sectors, such as the police, employers, doctors, stores/restaurants, voting in elections, healthcare and local public schools. Over 80 percent of blacks took the opposite point of view.

However, controversial police involvement in the shooting of black men in American cities in recent years has been widely reported, and a 2018 Gallup poll found that white Americans say they are now more aware of the discrimination that non-whites experience and that blacks are treated less fairly by the police and in stores and shopping malls. It is debatable whether these opinions will be translated into action to remove racist views and systems and whether they will be permanent. The number of Americans who see racism in the US as a big problem grew significantly in 2018 to over two-thirds the total population (up from 17 percent in 2010).

Conflicts concerning the nature of racism and ethnicity in the US show that a majority of respondents to polls believe legal immigration should be reduced and only a minority think it should be increased, while most want illegal immigration stopped. Many respondents feel that immigrants are a threat to traditional American values and customs, that immigrants take jobs away from American workers and that skilled and unskilled US workers and consumers are harmed by immigration. Americans who believe the ideas spread by the QAnon movement think that US immigration policy is part of a liberal conspiracy to replace old-stock Anglo-Americans.

Critics argue that there is still a nativist or xenophobic current in American culture. Diverse ethnic groups have had to both coexist and struggle for individual expression in the US. Today, they must live together in spite of inequalities and tensions between them. Immigration can have a potential for political and social instability, with either rejection of immigrants by settled Americans or rejection of Americanization (adaptation to mainstream American culture) by immigrants. However, these conflicts (arising out of social pluralism) and the problems of assimilation and integration by new groups are not distinctively American; they occur in other nations with diverse populations.

## Religious culture

American religious culture (see Chapter 5) has its roots in the faiths that colonists, slaves and immigrants brought to the US over the centuries as well as new American religions, such as the Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses, that were established inside the country. Some early settlers escaped religious persecution in their homelands and hoped to establish communities based on nonconformist beliefs, which reacted to and sought separation from, or purification of, national religions. Others brought established denominations with them. The religious faiths of initial



arrivals, particularly those with a Protestant identification, provided institutional and moral bases for the new nation, although conflicts between the different religious faiths were common. Many immigrants in later centuries strongly identified with their home faiths, which they preserved in the new country.

However, not all settlers were religiously inspired, although many might have maintained a nominal adherence to a particular faith. Some traveled for adventure, freedom, new experiences, material gain, land acquisition or to escape from European social and political habits. Religious observance fluctuated in later centuries. The US had periods when religiosity was very low and missionary activity was needed to restore the faiths. On the other hand, there have been periodic Great Awakenings, when it grew fervent.

Generally, strong religious belief, substantial observance at ceremonies and church services and a diversity of faiths became defining features of American society when compared with other Western countries. Still, American Protestantism today witnesses tensions between growing evangelistic groups and older “mainline” denominations. A rising secularism, moreover, takes members from both those groups. A distinguishing trait of American civic life continues to be a high degree of religiosity in the country’s civic culture, compared to European countries in the twenty-first century. Presidents Trump and Biden both proudly affirm their religious faith in their speeches and are televised at church.

Although US religion is a private, personal matter and is separated from the state by the Constitution, it informs and may condition social, economic and



**PLATE 1.5** The Capitol insurrection, January 6, 2021. A man carries a Confederate flag inside the Capitol after supporters of Donald Trump occupied the building.

*Source: REUTERS/Alamy Stock Photo*



political life in communities and at national levels beyond the purely denominational. The precise influence of religion (and its limits) on many areas of American life, such as education, politics and ethics, continues to be hotly debated. Despite a desire to keep religion out of politics by legislative and constitutional means, some critics question whether it is realistic or necessary to deny religion a full, active and legally decisive part in public life.

## Political-legal culture

The elements of American political-legal culture (see Chapters 6, 7, 8 and 9) have 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, which has historically required balancing state and local politics and policymaking;
- the perceived need to produce consensual (widely agreed) national policies so the system can operate.

The Constitution is central to this structure, but it has to be interpreted by the judiciary branch (particularly the US Supreme Court in Washington, DC) to determine through judicial review whether actions of government and other bodies are constitutional or not. The political system has institutional checks and balances at state and federal levels, which may result in stalemate. However, these features help solidify the society and move it toward consensus or centrist policies. Idealized versions of “America” constructed through its federal and state political organs and a general respect for the law can potentially minimize conflict.

The need for balance and compromise in the political-legal culture illustrates the degree of abstraction involved in defining “the US” and “Americanness.” The notion of what constitutes “America” has had to be revised or reinvented over time and reflects the tension between a materialistic practical reality, with its restrictions, and an idealistic, abstract and rhetorical image of the nation. Words such as “hope,” “democracy,” “traditional values” and “independence” are part of election campaigns and the wider US conversation. Ethnic differences, immigration and social diversity have been barriers to national unity and are still problematic. Consequently, it is often argued that the American political-legal system consists of both hard-nosed manipulation of group and ideological interests and a constitutional legalism that might promote common resolutions. Americans are also aware of potential corruption, fraud, incompetence and imperfection in the political and legal systems and that claims to “liberty” and “freedom” are not always respected in reality.

Responses to pluralism have often resulted in consensus politics based on political and judicial compromise in an attempt (not always achieved) to avoid stalemate. US politics are not usually considered to be as oppositional as in other nations, and historically there has been a variable 60 percent support for the center-left “liberal” Democratic Party and about 40 percent for the “conservative” Republican Party. However, in recent years, party politics has become more confrontational. Conservatives and liberals often describe themselves as closer to the political center than to the extremes. In the 2016 presidential election, on a low voter turnout of 55.3 percent, the Democrat candidate (Clinton) gained 48.2 percent of the popular vote (65.8 million votes) while the Republican candidate (Trump) gained 46.1 percent (62.9 million votes). Still, Trump won the election because he won 306 Electoral College votes compared to Clinton’s 232. In the next election cycle, the moderate Democrat, Joe Biden, won more than 53 percent of the popular vote across the nation and 306 electors compared to Trump’s 232. At the same time, voter turnout broke records and reached 66.2 percent, the highest since 1900.

Differences between party policies on ethnic minorities, the economy, education, employment, religion and social issues have increasingly played a divisive and polarizing role in US society and at bitterly fought elections with their fierce media electioneering. Voters may also register support and opposition across party lines on many single issues such as abortion, same-sex marriage, the death penalty, education, taxation and gun control. American politics, reflecting the federal nature of US government, tends to be more influenced by special or state interests than national matters. Politicians in the febrile atmosphere of Washington, DC, and state capitals promote their own legislation as a response to local and regional pressures. These mixed concerns often persuade Americans to vote in election lists for political representatives from different political parties who support specific issues and result in fiercely fought political battles.

Such struggles characterize American political/legal history, but critics maintain that the central political value is compromise. They argue that the Constitution is a document of concessions (balances) between competing interests, such as the legal rights of the accused judged against the power of prosecutors, the authority of judges placed against the elected Congress and president and the power of the people against the strength of government.

Critics debate whether or not there has been increased apathy and low political participation among US voters in recent decades, even when crucial matters are at stake. Some 70 percent of the eligible population register to vote (others do not even register), and there can be a low turnout of registered voters (at a 54 percent average) in elections. Low turnout suggests alienation from the political process, a feeling that power is in the hands of a political elite at state and Washington levels and that politicians ignore concerns of the voters. The high turnout in 2020 may suggest either a response to Trump’s controversial

presidency and the pandemic or a more general revival of interest in the political process.

## Economic culture

The economic framework (see Chapter 10) has a central cultural importance, and it is both idealistic/abstract and materialistic/practical. Americans generally hold a belief in individualism and a free enterprise system, which is supposed to supply goods and services demanded by the consumer market. People historically have had to fight for their economic and social survival, but the process can result in exploitation of others and a Darwinian “survival of the fittest” mentality. This mentality may be more strongly associated with Republicans than Democrats. The competitive nature of US life leads to great disparities of wealth, social inequalities and varying life opportunities. In 2019, for example, 38 million Americans were dependent upon the Supplemental Nutrition



**PLATE 1.6** The Time Warner Center at Columbus Circle in Manhattan, New York City, is an American mall, seen as typical of American social and economic life, where people gather to shop, meet friends, eat in restaurants, visit entertainment venues, live and work. However, the US mall's image as a place to buy and spend has been significantly weakened in recent years by the growth of the online sales industry, and some retail outlets have been forced to close.

*Source: Björn Söderqvist*

Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as government food stamps, with an average value of \$149 for each person per month in food assistance. During the continuing pandemic, many more people became dependent on public assistance for food. Recent economic research suggests that the gap between rich and poor has grown but also that the middle class has been squeezed and its numbers reduced.

Although free enterprise and corporate domination of US economic life may claim to deliver what the market requires, the system can also produce inferior products, bad service, corruption and a lack of variety, quality or real choice for consumers. Many Americans have historically claimed to be skeptical of “big business” and tend to support the principle of small businesses. However, debates about the capitalist model often ignore significant economic cooperation, charitable organizations, volunteerism and a substantial public sector in the national economy.

Both private and public economic sectors are subject to considerable fluctuations, whether due to market and global influences, speculation or human error. For example, the US economy has been considerably influenced since 2007–8 by a worldwide financial crisis, which resulted in a recession in 2010, a large budget deficit, job losses and unemployment, corporate closures, bank collapses and individual suffering. Federal Reserve data suggests the typical US household remains poorer following the 2010 recession, despite low inflation and some economic growth. The net worth (the difference between assets and liabilities) of the median family fell by some 40 percent from \$126,400 in 2007 to \$77,300 in 2010, driven partly by the collapse of the housing market and unemployment. Blame for this situation was placed on the banks and financial institutions for lending too much money in dubious subprime transactions, but individuals also often borrowed beyond their capacity to repay loans and mortgages.

Although the economy slowly recovered in the decade since 2010, it only became robust in the second and third years of Trump’s term in office. By 2019, unemployment dropped to historically low levels, not only for whites but also for blacks and Hispanics. As the pandemic continued in 2020, however, the bottom fell out of the economy. While the stock market continued to do well, tens of millions lost their jobs as the national shutdown closed services, cultural institutions, businesses and schools. By the summer of that year, many hundreds of thousands sat in their cars for hours after joining lines many miles long to pick up free food. In early 2021, Biden proposed a \$1.9 trillion economic stimulus to restart the economy.

## Media culture

Media culture (see Chapter 13) has historically grown from simple methods of production and communication to complex modern technologies, online Internet

services, a very diverse audience and market and a change from analog to digital means of production and transmission. These developments have been tied to political and social concerns, concentrated ownership of media, class identification, mass literacy, a dominant communication and social role and the expansion of entertainment. The written word was succeeded by broadcasting; television followed the cinema and radio; mass cultures developed more outlets and markets for the media; and the Internet and social media (such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter) have increased further technological possibilities and communication and leisure opportunities. Disney, Home Box Office (HBO) and Netflix have become significantly more influential production companies on a global basis.

The media have provided quality services, instant news, public participation and widened knowledge. But some media outlets have also sometimes allegedly abused their position. For instance, in Fox News's first interview with President Trump more than three weeks after the election, no critical questions were asked. The news media sometimes appeal to the lowest denominator of taste, encourage a "celebrity culture" and arguably reflect a "dumbing down" of social and educational values and products. However, they have protection and freedom under the First Amendment of the Constitution, which states that Congress shall not legislate to abridge the freedom of speech or the press. The apparent absolute nature of the amendment is still debated, and some critics argue that it has been progressively restricted by judicial decisions.

## Arts, sports and leisure cultures

Arts, sports and leisure activities (see Chapter 14) have historically been very diverse and often influential in the US and have reflected class, national and economic conditions. Consequently, they have been described in terms of elite or popular culture or divided into high-, middle- and lowbrow cultures. These divisions have expanded and changed over time, but some of the traditional defining limits (and social exclusions) still remain. Athletes have become celebrity advocates to a much greater extent – for example, by explicitly supporting the Black Lives Matter movement.

The arts have been characterized partly by output from theaters, opera companies, orchestras, film studios and ballet and dance companies, which today can provide both classical and more popular offerings. A wide range of music, from classical to urban and street music, pop, jazz and rock, is available, as are a range of dramatic plays and musicals at both amateur and professional levels. Museums and art galleries also have become increasingly popular and appeal to more sectors of society, although they are subject to economic downturn and fluctuating financial support. Many artistic activities are still carried out by individual participants themselves through different recreational, media and online outlets, as well as by the larger public and commercial organizations.



Sports and leisure activities are also marked by a large diversity of types, participation and attendance, although some of the historical distinctions between high and low culture still remain. These illustrate not only the class, economic and cost determinants of participation but also the complex composition of the population and its varied cultural interests.

## National identity

US cultures interact among themselves and in other parts of US life. They condition debates about what it means to be American, what constitutes a national identity and whether these searches should be restricted to formal civil guidelines (such as those contained in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights) or should also include informal American values.

A historical dilemma for the US has been how to balance a need for civic unity against the reality of ethnic diversity and how to avoid the dangers of fragmentation and conflict. Emphasis was initially placed on “Americanization,” or the assimilation of different ethnic groups into a shared, Anglo-American-based



**PLATE 1.7** The Fourth of July (Independence Day) is an official US holiday. It commemorates the day in 1776 when the Continental Congress in Philadelphia gave its approval to the Declaration of Independence from Britain. Now celebrated with processions, speeches, flags and fireworks, as seen here at the Denver City and County Building, Denver, Colorado.

*Source: Efrain Padro/Alamy Stock Photo*

identity or “melting pot.” But this aim was seen as pressuring immigrants to move into an Americanized dominant culture, with a possible resulting loss of their ethnic identity. “Assimilation” implies absolute national unity, whereas pragmatic “integration” occurs at more gradual levels of partial blending or mixing.

Debates on national identity have centered on questions of unity (Americanization) as opposed to diversity (ethnic pluralism or multiculturalism). In the 1950s, ethnic differences and issues seemed to be losing their urgency, but they were revived in the 1990s and early 2000s, particularly with the growth of Latino and Asian ethnic groups.

The debates have stressed either “American values” (often presented by consolidationist conservatives) or ethnic- or minority-group interests (supported by reform liberals). The assimilationist American ideal of *e pluribus unum* (out of many, one) was supposed to reconcile the two views under a civic umbrella. This ideal is seen by some as an abstract concept that does not reflect reality. On the other hand, emphases on ethnicity and difference arguably weaken the possibility of achieving formal civic norms that could represent a distinctive “American Way of Life.” Some critics feel that American society is at risk because of competing cultures and interest groups and that the resultant conflicts have weakened the sense and possibility of an overarching American identity and created a divided society.

From the late 1970s into the 2000s, there was a conservative reaction against liberal policies and affirmative action programs for minority groups, which allegedly discriminate in the latter’s favor in areas such as education and employment. Many conservatives are opposed to liberal policies on abortion, gun control, same-sex marriage, religion, the death penalty and immigration. These debates have increased anxieties about national identity and the direction of the country, as reflected in many polls.

Divisions of opinion have led critics to argue that the US should more realistically be regarded ethnically, culturally and ideologically as an integrationist “mosaic,” “salad bowl,” “pizza” or “stew mix,” rather than a “melting pot.” While the latter model of America has been rejected in some quarters, the metaphors of salads and stews nevertheless imply that variety and difference should be incorporated into a larger “American” whole. The difficulty lies in defining what the core identity and binding civic structure might or should be.

The reality of cultural and ethnic pluralism (difference) in US society continues, as do arguments in support of homogenization (sameness). It is argued that degrees of separateness and integration vary between ethnic groups and that absolute social assimilation is both undesirable and impossible. But this can lead to hybrid or “multicultural” identities on the one hand and the breakdown of strong national links or bonds on the other.

While there are extremes of opinion, unfairness, diversity and vested interests in US society, it is felt that underlying commitments to formal civil rights of freedom, justice, tolerance and equality under the law can succeed in limiting