

## A State of Disunion?

By James Davison Hunter and Daniel C. Johnson

The question posed most often by the social sciences when they consider matters of political culture is simply this: Is the American political system facing a legitimation crisis? The answer to this question, as revealed in our data, is both yes and no. According to the 1996 Survey on American Political Culture<sup>1</sup>, there appears to be a fundamental contradiction at play in American political culture today.

To begin, it does not seem as though the ideals of the American political system are being seriously questioned. In terms of the framing narratives that constitute its collective memories, the standards by which it measures its relative goodness, and the kinds of behaviors it expects of its citizens, a remarkable consensus exists in the American polity. Moreover, this consensus is marked by what can only be called a "high-mindedness."

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For instance, Americans do seem to share some common beliefs about their collective history, and they do seem to be committed to our nation's established political system. Likewise, Americans express a fairly high degree of civic-mindedness and claim a high degree of participation in civic life. By their own estimations, they are actively shaping the forces that impinge upon their collective destiny, and they are reflecting seriously on those moral and civic questions that perplex all Americans. (Such reflections, it should be noted, are usually relatively conservative in orientation. The majority of Americans, for example, prefer schools that teach "traditional values" over more "value-neutral" schools.) Americans also seem fairly active in social organizations and are relatively aware of what is going on in public life. To top it all off, most Americans seem fairly content with their own situations; they report being "pleased" or "enthused" about their families, their current jobs, their financial situations, their churches or fellowships, their spiritual conditions, and their futures.

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And yet there is another side to this story. Embedded within Americans' almost sleepy acquiescence to the political order, its ideals and their own life circumstances, we discovered some of the kernels of dissatisfaction with "politics" (read with disgust) that many political theorists suggested we would find. Contemporary American political culture does seem to be marked by some rather harsh views concerning the actual operation of the political system; more specifically, there are concerns about the effect of the political regime on the people who find themselves subjected to it. We can highlight three principal findings in this regard:

### 1. Pessimism About America's Current Direction

For all the high-mindedness that Americans have toward the ideals of the system, their assessments of current trends in the nation are remarkably pessimistic. Over half of our sample contends that the United States is currently in decline, and one out of five suggests the decline is strong. Meanwhile, less than 10% venture to say that the nation is improving.

The areas of social life that Americans single out most often as sources of strong decline are crime and public safety, family life, ethics and morals, and the public schools. More detailed analysis demonstrates that respondents who are the most pessimistic about the future of the nation are generally more sensitive to matters of morality, as well as to perceived problems in the institutions responsible for shaping moral sensibilities.

There is little indication, however, that these kinds of perceptions have brought the American people to a boiling point. By and large, the emotions that Americans associate with issues related to the health of the nation are "fear" and "worry" rather than "anger" or "resentment." While pessimism (and even despair) reign, the popular image of the angry American—white, male, or otherwise—seems more chimera than reality.

### 2. A Continuing Loss of Confidence

As noted above, in the abstract realm of political ideals, we found that only the slimmest slice of the American population could be classified as disaffected. When it comes to the actual functioning of the system as it stands today, however, the picture is far bleaker. On the whole, Americans are profoundly disaffected from the politicians who exercise power, the bureaucrats who are running the system, and the role they see government playing.

## **Americans Rate Their Society...**

Our survey found that only 32% of Americans have “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in the federal government. This view is even less likely to be held by the young, those with lower and middle incomes, and the politically independent. Similarly, just three years ago, 50% of the population had “a lot” or “some” confidence that “when the government decides to solve a problem, the problem will actually be solved.” In our Survey of American Political Culture, only 39% had that level of confidence. Accordingly, the number of those with no confidence that the problem will be solved grew from 16% to 21%.

On the whole, the majority of Americans voice concerns about the degree to which the government intrudes in their lives. Sixty-three percent agree that “the federal government controls too much of our daily lives.” Sixty-eight percent say that “our federal tax system is mostly unfair.” Four out of ten Americans surveyed believe that “the federal government seems mostly hostile to religion.”

These attitudes seem to translate readily into a general distrust of “big government.” The majority of the population agrees that the best government is one that governs least. The majority also favors reducing the size of the federal government, and almost as many favor reducing the size of state government. Accordingly, a majority also favors shifting many government functions from the federal to state level.

Building on this sense of disaffection with the way things are run, the responses of most Americans accord with the understanding that they are “without a voice” in the current system. The average citizen simply feels excluded from how the government operates. Half agree that ordinary people “don’t have any say about what the government does.” Six out

of ten Americans indicate that ordinary “people like me don’t have any say about what the government does.”

Finally, the vast majority of Americans (81%) agree with the stinging indictment that “political events these days seem more like theater or entertainment than like something to be taken seriously.” Be it confused, angry, or indifferent, the public as a whole has come to recognize (and to resent) the connection between publicity, show-business, and political leadership.

### **3. Cynicism Toward Governing Elites**

What begins as a general sense of pessimism about the condition of our country evolves into a disaffection with the nation’s government and other public institutions. With regard to the current political leadership and, more broadly, America’s governing elite, people’s opinions turn toward cynicism. Two-thirds of the American public believe that while the American system of government is good, “the people running it are incompetent.” Additionally, there is a wide-spread sense that politicians have an imperious disregard for the concerns of ordinary citizens. Seven out of ten people, for example, believe that “most elected officials don’t care what people like me think.”

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If unconcerned with ordinary citizens, politicians, according to public opinion, are supremely concerned with themselves and their own personal interests. Indeed, eight out of ten Americans agree that “our leaders are more concerned with managing their images than with solving our nation’s problems.” By that same margin, Americans also agree that “most politicians are more interested in winning elections than in doing what is right.” These attitudes have increased remarkably since 1990 when a Roper study found that 41% of Americans said “congressmen spend more time thinking of their own political futures than they do in passing wise legislation.”

Confidence in politicians has declined precipitously since 1966 when 41% of the population had “a great deal of confidence” in the presidency. One decade later this figure was 23%, a rate that held fairly steady for two decades. Today, only 13% of the American people have “a great deal of confidence” in the executive office. Confidence in Congress has seen a similar decline. In 1966, 42% of the population had “a great deal of confidence” in this institution. By the mid-1970s, the figure had declined to the teens. In 1996, the number dropped to 5%.

#### **Why Elites Are Disliked**

The public’s increasingly negative opinion of politicians is coupled with its distrust for the larger body of governing elites—those people who run major institutions such as the government, universities, and the mass media. The majority of Americans regard the

governing elite as insensitive to people's concerns, disinterested in values, morality and the common good, and caring only about their own agendas.

The majority also views the governing elite as irreligious, out of touch with reality, out of the mainstream, and devoid of character. Interestingly, public cynicism about our nation's leadership cuts even more sharply. Eight out of ten Americans agree that "our country is run by a close network of special interests, public officials, and the media." By the same margin, Americans agree that the government itself "is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves." Twenty years ago, just 60% of the population agreed with this statement. By 1992, the number rose to 75%. Suspicion and cynicism seem to have increased sharply in the last two decades.

#### A Weakening Middle Class

The contradictions outlined here vary in intensity. What is perhaps most striking is that the contradictions are broadly represented, *not* on the fringe, *not* among minorities, and *not* so much among the poor and poorly educated, but rather *in the white middle class*.

Though more prominent on the conservative side of the political spectrum, disaffection manifests itself among the left and the very liberal as well. The contradiction is marked by identification on the one hand, disdain on the other hand; affection and disaffection. And the basic middle class character of this contradiction is undeniable.

#### A Fear of Falling?

The middle classes are significant in part because they sense that they have much to lose. *Time* magazine essayist Barbara Ehrenreich has argued that the middle classes are inherently insecure and are, therefore, overcome by a "fear of falling"—a fear of the downward slide in affluence and a fear "of inner weakness, of growing soft, of failing to strive, of losing discipline and will."

Such contentions are difficult to demonstrate. Yet the Survey of American Political Culture does show that the middle classes, on the whole, are not especially worried about the national economy, the local economy, about their jobs or their personal finances. Rather, what they fear and what upsets them is the sense that everything they have lived for—their Judeo-Christian God, their family life, their moral commitments, their work ethic, and the public school system that would pass their beliefs on to their children—is in decline and possibly disappearing. *It is not a "fear of falling" that haunts the middle classes but a fear of the curtain falling upon their way of life.*

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The fear has at least two sources. On the one hand there is fear that their way of life (something they are generally content with) is being lost due to developments in the culture they feel but do not quite understand. On the other hand, there is a sense that the middle class lifestyle is being taken away—in part by the ineptitude of the nation's political leadership and in part by the distant machinations of the governing elite. Either way, they feel very sharply that the framework of their lives is fading into irrelevance. In short, the rules of the game have changed without their permission, leaving them a bit bewil-

dered, fearful, and angry. The implicit assumption within their disaffection and cynicism is that it is the responsibility of the government and its leaders to defend their way of life. Disaffection and cynicism are just different ways of expressing their deep sense of loss.

The consequences of this middle class discontent with national culture are not trivial. As much as Americans want to distance themselves from the excesses and eccentricities of militia groups and domestic terrorists, they cannot, for the violent activities of these groups occur in a cultural context defined and made plausible by the middle classes themselves. Is it really surprising that, according to the *New York Times*, white people from lower-middle and middle class suburbs are increasingly the perpetrators of criminal explosions? Perhaps even more troubling is the importance of the middle classes to civil society. It is the strength of civic institutions that keeps democracy vibrant and resistant to authoritarianism. As we all know, when the middle classes retreat into cynicism, the vitality of those civic institutions can only be weakened.

#### The Cultural Contradictions of American Political Culture

As we have seen, the ideal of American political culture is marked by a certain high-mindedness shared by Americans almost across the board. Americans, on the whole, still share a sense of the nation's noble legacy, its great achievements, and its yet unfulfilled promise. To be sure, there is considerable fragmentation and polarization within the American public as to how we should understand this ideal and how we should pass this ideal on. Nevertheless, a basic idealism about America and a commitment to work toward the realization of this ideal in public and political life undeniably exists. Meanwhile, the substance of American political culture is marked by a deep pessimism, a trenchant disaffection from the large-scale political institutions that order collective life, and a barely restrained cynicism toward a national political leader-

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ship that symbolizes those failed institutions while attempting to lead them.

At the level of national political culture there is, in fact, a remarkable consensus within *both* its ideal and substantive dimensions. The tension seems to derive from the fact that they exist in seeming contradiction to each other. High-mindedness and cynicism co-exist; idealism and exasperation abide side by side.

On the face of it, then, one cannot conclude that there is a monolithic legitimization crisis in America today. Where a "legitimation deficit" exists, it is most pronounced within the substance of political culture, not its ideal; it also takes shape in people's experience of national political and civic institutions, not those that are local.

### How Sustainable Are the Contradictions?

The contradiction between the ideals that people hold and the substance that people experience is not just a matter of citizens being frustrated by not seeing their political system—which they like, which they perceive as good, which they are committed to—perform better. No, the problem seems to be

*structural*—largely a function of the size of political institutions, the natural foibles and failures of their leaders (under the spotlight of the national media), dissatisfaction with the way the system now operates, and, perhaps most important, the distance Americans feel from their political institutions.

The critical question is obvious: Is this situation sustainable over time? We see, for example, that the overwhelming majority of Americans believe that most politicians are more interested in winning elections than in doing what is right; that our national leaders are more concerned with managing their images than with solving our nation's problems; and that the distinction between democratic discourse and stock Hollywood drama has disappeared. How long are Americans willing to put up with this before concluding that electoral politics may be a sham?

So too the majority of Americans believe that the federal government is run by incompetent people, that it wastes a lot of tax money, that the tax system is mostly unfair and that it is not capable of solving a problem it chooses to solve. How long will citizens accept this situation before concluding that the system may be irreparably defective?

In short, given the fact that the state is not likely to get smaller any time soon and its functions are not likely to become less alienating, the question is, how long can the cultural contradictions of American political life be sustained without cynicism overtaking hope—yielding utter indifference or perhaps even incursions of anarchy?

There are those who say that the system is self-sustaining and that the procedures, laws, regulations, and mechanisms of power can sustain the democratic experiment through these contradictions however intense they may become. They almost suggest that democracy can continue without the rational consent of the people and a publicly-held philosophy that grounds a common commitment to liberty and justice. This, of course, remains to be seen. Is it naive, however, to imagine that the weakening of the normative ideals surrounding civic life will have little or no effect upon the operational consent people give to the state over the long term?

### Endnote

<sup>1</sup> This survey was sponsored, designed and analyzed by the Post-Modernity Project at the University of Virginia. Fieldwork was conducted by the Gallup Organization. Fund-



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