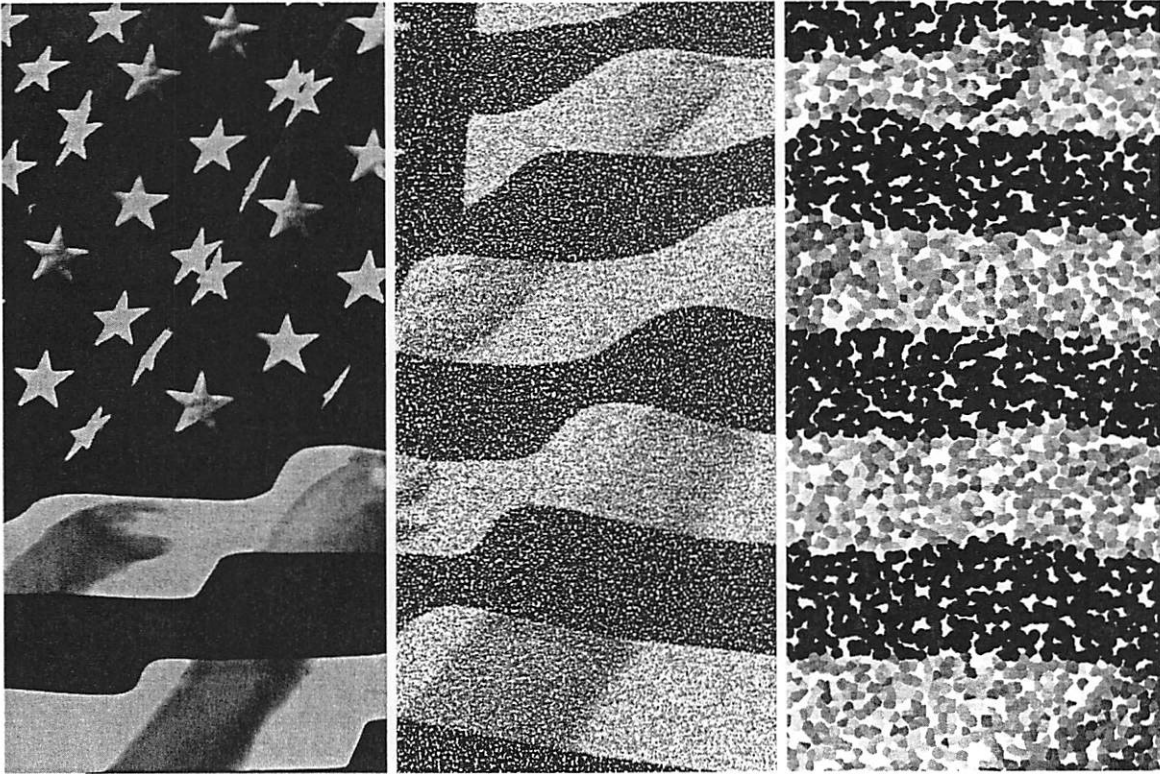


Attained Bx Col. Ray in Washington  
January 24th 1997

# *The State of Disunion*



THE POST-MODERNITY PROJECT  
UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

1996 SURVEY OF AMERICAN POLITICAL CULTURE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE POST-MODERNITY PROJECT  
UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

*The State of Disunion*  
1996 Survey of American Political Culture

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The State of Disunion: 1996 Survey of American Political Culture  
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# INTRODUCTION

## POLITICS AND POLITICAL CULTURE: THE CRITICAL DIFFERENCE

FOLLOWING politics is like following the weather. We focus on the day's forecast, project only a few days into the future, and consider the past week distant history. Like weather forecasting, making predictions about long term election outcomes is risky business, but great sport all the same. Indeed, as with the weather, the only constants in the realm of politics are complexity and endless change. The problem, however, with following politics in the way that one might follow the weather is that one risks missing dramatic changes in climate—that is, the cultural milieu in which political action takes place.

Thus, in public life, politics is to the weather what political culture is to the overall climate. That is, if politics is the manipulation of power, political culture is the normative context within which these manipulations take place. This context includes the ideals, beliefs, values, symbols, stories, and public rituals that bind people together and direct them in common action. Political action emanates from political culture, is a reflection of that culture's ideals, and, in turn, reinforces that culture's normative boundaries. Needless to say, the politics of a society may change and change a lot, but the normative context—the political culture—of a society will change only very slowly, and when it does change, its changes will be of great consequence. Political culture provides the boundaries of political legitimacy and the horizons of political possibility. Changes that take place within political culture portend much about the future

ordering of public life.

By and large it is the philosopher and the social theorist who have been most interested in political culture. Observers have written poignantly about the fragmentation of civic culture, about the erosion of the moral foundations for citizenship, about the political significance of new class divisions, about the loss of legitimacy for key public institutions, and so on. Their warnings are ominous, substantiated repeatedly by anecdote, but more rarely tested against empirical data.

### *The Survey*

In 1996 the Post-Modernity Project combined forces with the Gallup Organization of Princeton, New Jersey to conduct one of the most comprehensive surveys ever on American political culture in order to ascertain how much of today's talk

about America's problems can be substantiated. And to the extent that contentions over popular attitudes and commitments do exist, what are their social characteristics? Overall, the Post-Modernity Project's objective in designing this survey has been to move today's conversation about the state of our nation to a theoretically-informed and empirically-based level of discourse. Based on over 2,000 face-to-face interviews, each of which lasted over an hour, the *Survey of American Political Culture* provides a fascinating, empirically-rich portrait of American public opinion on the eve of the 21st century.

In the survey report, we address, in preliminary form, the question: What is the current "state of the union" (or "disunion" as the case may be)? We are interested less in views on "who will you vote for?" or "do you favor *such and such* legislation?"; rather, we are interested in political culture in general.

Our survey has attempted to provide a bridge between the theorist and the empiricist, and to compensate for their mutually reinforcing bad tendencies—endless abstraction and mindless number crunching. To be sure, we are under no illusion about the limits of our data. Public opinion surveys can touch upon only certain kinds of information about the culture. Though they can never provide the final word on any topic, they are nevertheless important components in any broad analysis of political culture in general. This survey seeks to bridge the empirical and theoretical, and enables us to speak, even if provisionally, with greater care and specificity about the "climatological" political and cultural changes taking place across America.

Clearly, our survey data do not summarize all that there is to say about our nation's public and political culture. Culture is much more than the sum total of people's attitudes. In fact, it is a reality independent of opinions. It exists within the political symbols, public rituals, and shared narratives of common life. Thus, in order fully to comprehend just what is going on in America today, we must heed the contributions of political theorists, cultural anthropologists, and political sociologists.

Even so, public opinion research in general (and the *Survey of American Political Culture* in particular) has a role to play in the discussion. This survey, made possible by the generous support of a University of Virginia alumnus, examines popular perceptions of, and expectations for, American democracy—and the culture in which our democracy is embedded. To this end, it penetrates beyond the outward manifestations of America's most recent dilemmas—the apparent disaffection with our present political system, the prominence of special interest groups (the "Christian Right" not least among them), the proliferation of anti-government militias, the virulence of public discourse, and so on. By exploring these matters in some depth, we at the Post-Modernity Project hope that this survey will enrich our understanding of the current political milieu and help us to address more effectively the serious challenges posed in our day both to democracy and to the culture that sustains it.

James Davison Hunter  
Project Director  
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# *The State of Disunion*

## Survey of American Political Culture

### MAJOR FINDINGS

#### General Agreement on Ideals of Public Life

At the core of American political culture is what many have called the "American creed" and the virtues that make that creed binding. While this American creed has contributed to our nation's vitality and success, many like Schlesinger are concerned that recent developments, such as the rise of multiculturalism and post-modernism, are undermining this creed; that America's collective identity and memory are fraying at the seams. And yet,

1. The survey data show remarkably high levels of support for the "American creed." For example:

- ◆ Nearly nine out of ten respondents (87 percent) agree that it is important to teach children that America from its beginning "has had a destiny to set an example for other nations."
- ◆ More than nine out of ten Americans (94 percent) agree that it is important to teach children that "America's contribution is one of expanding freedom for more and more people."
- ◆ By about the same margin (92 percent), Americans agree that children should be taught that "Our founders limited the

power of government, so government would not intrude too much into the lives of its citizens."

- ◆ Another part of the American legacy is the idea that "America is the world's great melting pot, in which people from different countries are united into one nation." Here again, more than nine out of ten Americans (95 percent) agree that it is important to teach children this principle.
- ◆ Despite failures to fully live up to principles of justice and fairness, Americans' hope for freedom and betterment is alive. The vast majority (96 percent) agrees that the principle that "with hard work and perseverance, anyone can succeed in America" should be taught to children.
- ◆ So too, there is widespread agreement (95 percent of all surveyed) with Tocqueville's dictum that "democracy is only as strong as the virtue of its citizens."

2. The agreement on the "American Creed" not only plays out in the realm of basic educational ideals, but also in regards to the American political system.

- ◆ A majority indicated that it has "respect for the political institutions in America" (56 percent) and pride in "living under our system of government" (76 percent).

- ◆ A majority (80 percent) also expressed a high degree of "support for our system of government."
  - ◆ Finally, a majority (69 percent) felt that "our system of government is the best possible system." Americans, as a whole, are anything but revolutionaries when it comes to our established political system.
3. Beyond their embrace of much of the "American creed" and their principled endorsement of democracy as a system of government, Americans also demonstrate a fairly high degree of civic-mindedness.
- ◆ Just under nine out of ten respondents had positive to very positive feelings toward the terms "community" and "civic responsibility."
  - ◆ When presented with a list of possible actions toward others or toward one's community, the majority of respondents expressed a remarkable and admirable spirit of civic commitment.
  - ◆ When asked what should take greater priority, individual freedom or the public good, only 17 percent said that individual freedom should take precedence. Half (49 percent) said they both should have equal priority and one-third (34 percent) said that the public good should take greater priority.

## And yet, in terms of how the system is actually working . . .

### *Pessimism About America*

4. On more particular issues what stands out is the American people's *pervasive pessimism* about the actual state of our nation's institutions, and the state of America as a whole.
- ◆ A mere ten percent of our sample felt that the United States is improving overall, and only one out of 100 would go so far as to say that this improvement is strong.

- ◆ A full 50 percent of respondents, by contrast, admitted to the view that the US is actually in decline, and more than one out of five even contended that this is a strong decline.

### *Disaffection toward the Government*

5. The Survey also confirms that a "legitimation deficit" has emerged in the post-World War Two era.
- ◆ In our survey, only 32 percent of Americans have "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of "confidence in the Federal government."
  - ◆ Twenty-one percent expressed *no* confidence that "when the government decides to solve a problem, the problem will actually be solved."
  - ◆ Sixty-three percent agrees that "the Federal government controls too much of our daily lives."
  - ◆ Half of all Americans agree that ordinary people "don't have any say about what the government does."
  - ◆ Sixty-eight percent agrees that "our Federal tax system is mostly unfair," an opinion held almost uniformly among all age groups, all races and ethnic groups, and all social classes.
  - ◆ Four out of ten Americans surveyed believe that "the Federal government seems mostly hostile to religion." This opinion is especially held by those who are most affected—the religiously active.
  - ◆ The majority (61 percent) agrees that the best government is one that governs least. The majority (64 percent) favors reducing the size of the Federal government and almost as many (57 percent) favor reducing the size of state government. Accordingly, a majority (57 percent) also favors shifting many governmental functions from the Federal to state level.
6. Just as there is widespread support among Americans for our political system in theo-

ry, there is pervasive dissatisfaction with its practical functioning, particularly at the national level.

- ◆ Given that the disaffection with the state is not homogeneous, we found that there are a sizable minority (between one-fifth and one-fourth) who, regarding most areas of American life, are pleased or at least content with the state of affairs.
  - ◆ At a national level, Americans seem most pleased by the condition of our nation's churches and synagogues—57 percent have such favorable sentiment.
  - ◆ However, between one-fifth and one-sixth of the population is just confused by what is going on within these areas of social life. The majority of Americans are “worried” or “upset” by conditions within America today. These sentiments are most greatly held regarding the family (60 percent), the ethical-moral condition (59 percent), the economy (56 percent), public school (54 percent), and the national government (50 percent).
  - ◆ A minority are just plain angry or resentful. That which generates the greatest anger is the criminal justice system (21 percent), elected officials (15 percent), and the quality of debate (14 percent).
7. While just one-third of all Americans have “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of “confidence in the Federal government,” only a slightly greater number (39 percent) has the same level of confidence in state government. Yet as one moves to the local community, the sentiment of disaffection begins to change appreciably, confirming Tocqueville's observation that democracy works best when it is local. Democratic processes and the institutions that sustain them also have greater legitimacy as they become local.
- ◆ Fifty-seven percent of those surveyed say they are at least content if not pleased with their local government.
  - ◆ The same pattern holds in other areas—legitimacy increases as one gets closer to

home—75 percent are content with their local churches, 68 percent are content with family life in their community, 59 percent are content with their local economy, 55 percent are content with their local political officials.

- ◆ In general, people are still worried if not upset with the ethical and moral condition of their community and with their local schools, especially in urban areas, but this does not translate into seething resentment. Indeed, as one would expect, legitimacy increases even further as these institutions reach personal experience—90 percent are content with their family, 76 percent are content with their job, 65 percent are content about their personal financial situation, and 85 percent are content with their personal spiritual condition.
8. The general patterns of legitimacy at the *national* level hold up pretty well across the American population with a few notable exceptions.
- ◆ It is not the poor who are the most upset with the government, or its corollary institutions (like the public school system) or the family or the nation's moral and ethical values and so on—those at the bottom of the socioeconomic spectrum are, in fact, the *least* upset with the government.
  - ◆ Rather, those who are most worried, upset, and angry—indeed those with the most negative sentiments generally—are the white, well-educated middle classes.

### *Cynicism toward Political Leadership*

9. What begins with pessimism about the condition of the overall state of the country and its key areas of social life continues into a disaffection with the actual functioning of the government and related institutions. Toward the current political leadership and, more broadly, America's governing elite, the opinion turns toward cynicism.
- ◆ Two-thirds of the American public believes that while the American “system of gov-



ernment is good, the people running it are incompetent"; 90 percent believes that "people in government waste a lot of the money we pay in taxes."

- ◆ Seven out of ten people, for example, believe that "most elected officials don't care what people like me think."
  - ◆ Eight of ten Americans (78 percent) 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."
  - ◆ Trends: In 1966, 41 percent of the population had "a great deal of confidence" in the presidency. One decade later this figure was 23 percent, a figure that held fairly steady for two decades. Today, only 13 percent of the American people have "a great deal of confidence" in the Executive office. In 1966, 42 percent of the population had "a great deal of confidence" in Congress. By the mid-70s, this figure fluctuated in the teens. In 1996, this figure is just five percent.
10. The public's increasingly negative opinion of politicians is coupled with its distrust for the larger body of cultural and political 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 the people's concerns (64 percent), unconcerned with values and morality (59 percent), unconcerned with the common good (54 percent), and only concerned about the elite's own agenda (69 percent).
  - ◆ The majority also views the governing elite as irreligious (60 percent), out of touch with reality (53 percent), not in the mainstream (52 percent), and as individuals, not people of character (53 percent).
  - ◆ Such antipathy is softened, somewhat, by the majority's sense that the governing elite is, nevertheless well-meaning (56 percent),

not extremist on the whole (68 percent), patriotic (63 percent), and even democratic (58 percent).

- ◆ 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-four percent of those surveyed said that the phrase "involved in a conspiracy" describes the governing elite well.
11. As to public discourse, it is now, almost exclusively, the discourse of elites. Indeed, the average citizen feels excluded from public discussion.
- ◆ Six out of ten Americans (60 percent) agree that ordinary "people like me don't have any say about what the government does." This is an opinion held much more strongly by the poor, working and lower middle classes, and by the poorly educated.
  - ◆ Only one out of five Americans finds the *quality* of our national political debates and discussions acceptable.
  - ◆ Whether confused, angry, resentful, or indifferent, the vast majority of Americans (81 percent) resonates with the stinging indictment that "political events these days seem more like theater or entertainment than like something to be taken seriously."

## The Pressure Points in American Democracy

### *Racial Matters*

12. Race in America, it is often observed, is a powder keg capable of exploding. No one would deny the deep tensions that exist. But the differences do not seem to "go all the way down." The *Survey of American Political Culture* surprisingly shows how much

Blacks and whites agree with each other, at least on matters of political culture.

- ◆ On the whole, Blacks are as committed to the American dream as are whites; they are as civic-minded as whites; and as supportive of the political system as whites.
  - ◆ Blacks and whites embrace middle-class morality at roughly the same levels, and Blacks manifest as much, if not more, religious commitment and traditional piety as whites.
  - ◆ Blacks are no more or less pessimistic about America or American institutions, and they are no more or less disaffected from the government and its leaders than are whites.
13. Our survey indicates that the most important differences between Blacks and whites are their opposing views toward race relations and racial policy.
- ◆ When asked, for example, to look back over the last ten years and to consider whether they think the quality of life for African-Americans in the US has gotten better, stayed about the same, or gotten worse, nearly two-thirds (62 percent) of all whites thought it had gotten better, a figure twice that expressed by African-Americans (34 percent).
  - ◆ Accordingly, only 12 percent of all whites thought that the quality of life for African-Americans had gotten worse, but African-Americans perceive their own situation differently: nearly three times the number of Blacks (33 percent) held this view.
14. Despite some of these marked differences in perception, Americans are not hiding from the race dilemma.
- ◆ Eight out of ten Americans (80 percent Blacks, 82 percent whites) believe that greater cultural and ethnic diversity is good, and three-fourths of all Americans (75 percent Blacks, 78 percent whites) believes that greater attention to equality for racial and ethnic minorities is good.

- ◆ Two-thirds (65 percent) of all Americans (Blacks and whites by the same margin) have positive feelings for the phrase "multicultural." (One quarter of the population is neutral toward the word.)
- ◆ By the same token, nine out of ten Americans (the same for whites and Blacks) believe that "treating all people equally regardless of race or ethnic background" is an "absolutely essential" or "very important" obligation.

15. Americans continue to show marked disagreement on specific policies according to race.

- ◆ Fewer than half of all whites (46 percent) have positive feelings toward the phrase "affirmative action," compared to 58 percent of all Hispanics and 61 percent of all Blacks. Moreover, 41 percent of all Blacks and 43 percent of all Hispanics strongly oppose ending affirmative action, compared to just 25 percent of all whites.

### *The Social Elites*

16. The *Survey* also highlights some characteristics of the social elites. In our study, we find that:

- ◆ "Social elites" are individuals who have at least some graduate level education and whose occupation (or the occupation of the family's primary wage earner) is either small business owner; manager or public official; professional; or retiree with an income of at least \$50,000 a year.
- ◆ Social elites are the most negative of all social groups toward words like "traditional," "conservative," and "Christian." Moreover, they are the most positive of all social groups toward phrases like "ethnic diversity," "multiculturalism," "tolerance," and "empowerment."
- ◆ On matters of religious faith, social elites are the least likely to believe literally in the Bible, to pray daily or several times per week, and to describe themselves as theological conservatives—they are, in fact, the

most likely to describe their beliefs as theologically liberal. Indeed, social elites are the least likely to say they believe in "God" and the most likely to say they believe in a "universal spirit or life-force." They are also the least likely of all social groups to ascribe importance to their religious beliefs.

- ◆ Social elites are indeed, as Christopher Lasch maintained, dubious about, if not dismissive toward, traditional middle-class morality. According to the *Survey of American Political Culture*, elites, are least likely to reject as immoral (and most likely to view as morally indifferent) such behaviors as watching pornography, smoking marijuana, smoking cigarettes, drinking alcohol, having sex before marriage, engaging in homosexual relations, and supporting or participating in homosexual marriage.
- ◆ Elites are also the social group most likely to reject traditional middle-class family life. That is, they are the most likely of all to reject the idea of a wife putting her husband and children ahead of her career and, correspondingly, the idea of a man being the achiever outside the home while the woman takes care of home and family. Moreover, elites are the least likely to see the virtues of disciplining a child with a "good hard spanking." As the survey points out, these social elites are not so much against the idea of "family values" per se, but they are the least likely to be very positive toward the concept.

### *The Christian Right*

17. One of the most consequential social movements within American political culture over the last two decades has been the so-called "Christian Right"—a movement of politically conservative and engaged Evangelical Christians. What do we know about the Christian Right?

- ◆ Evangelicals, broadly defined, comprise between one-fifth and one-fourth of the American population. Evangelicals who

are politically conservative *and* politically active (the Christian Right) number just under five percent of the total American population, and represent only one-fifth of all Evangelicals.

- ◆ The Christian Right is composed disproportionately of women (58 percent women as compared to 42 percent men). And as with the larger Evangelical population, members of the Christian Right are also disproportionately from the South—nearly half (47 percent) are from this region.
- ◆ Over 96 percent of the Christian Right is white (compared to 79 percent of the general population). In addition, the Christian Right is sizably over-represented among "baby boomers" between the ages of 35 and 49. About half of the participants in the Christian Right are from this age bracket.
- ◆ Over half of the movement's membership comes from the open country and towns of less than ten thousand people, compared to one-third of the general population.
- ◆ Nearly eight out of ten members (78 percent) of the Christian Right are Republicans (compared to 28 percent of the total population and 30 percent of all Evangelicals outside the movement). Roughly ten percent are Democrats (in contrast to the 47 percent of non-Right Evangelicals who are Democrats and the 42 percent of all Americans who are Democrats). About 12 percent of the Christian Right are Independent in their political affiliation.
- ◆ Compared to the general population, members of the Christian Right (unlike their non-politicized Evangelical counterparts) are disproportionately well-educated, well-paid, and from the professional classes. Two-thirds of the Christian Right claims to have at least some college education, compared to just half of the total population. One-third claims to have a bachelors degree or higher (compared to

one-fifth of the general population) and among this one-third 16 percent indicated that they have a graduate level education (again, compared to ten percent of the whole population).

#### 18. The Christian Right and American Political Culture

- ◆ Supporters of the Christian Right are among the most unwavering in their commitment to the American political system. Half (48 percent) the participants of the Christian Right scored high in their "respect for the political institutions in America" (compared to one-third of the general population); 71 percent of Christian Right supporters scored high on measures of their pride in living "under our political system" (compared to 61 percent of the general population); over two-thirds (68 percent) said they felt highly that "our system of government is the best possible system" (compared to one-half [53 percent] of the general population); and 85 percent of Christian Right supporters scored high when asked if they felt they "should support our system of government" (compared to 65 percent of the general population).
- ◆ In contrast to these affirmations, however, the Christian Right displays a remarkable pessimism about the current state of affairs in American society. This pessimism is unrivaled among other Americans and most other American sub-groups. For example, 81 percent of Christian Right supporters said that they thought that America was in either strong or moderate decline, compared to 51 percent of the total population.
- ◆ More than nine out of ten, on average, of this group are worried, afraid, upset or angry about the nation's moral condition and the state of American family life.
- ◆ Four out of five are also upset about our elected officials in Washington, the condition of our criminal justice system, and our educational system. As to the government, only two percent of the Christian Right

expresses any positive sentiment about the government. Three-fourths (77 percent) of the Christian Right express a negative sentiment. Of these, 15 percent have feelings that go beyond worry and displeasure to anger and resentment when asked how they feel about the condition of our nation as a whole.

- ◆ The members of the Christian Right were more likely than the general population to have "little confidence" in the federal government—25 percent compared to 17 percent. Forty-seven percent said that they had "little confidence" in the president, compared to 23 percent of the general population.
- ◆ Eight of ten say that the Federal government seems mostly hostile toward religion, compared to just four of ten in the general public.
- ◆ Nearly eight out of ten adherents to the Christian Right (77 percent) have little to no confidence that "the people who run our government tell the truth to the public" (compared to 64 percent of the general population).
- ◆ Eighty-seven percent of the Christian Right have an unfavorable opinion about President Clinton (58 percent have a "very unfavorable" opinion) compared to 41 percent of non-politicized Evangelicals, 39 percent of all Mainline Protestants, and about 34 percent of all Catholics. The negative rating politically conservative Christians give to Clinton is only a bit less than what they give Louis Farakhan (95 percent negative) and Madonna (98 percent negative).

#### 19. How Americans View the Christian Right

- ◆ Contrary to the general media impression of the Christian Right, the majority of the American population views those who make up the conservative Christian movement as patriotic (71 percent), well-meaning (72 percent), people of character (70 percent) and conviction (78 percent), who are concerned about the family (81 percent) and morality (81 percent).

- ◆ A plurality of Americans also says that the terms "backward" (67 percent), "low in education" (80 percent), "out of touch with reality" (63 percent), and "mean-spirited" (72 percent) do *not* describe the Christian Right well.
- ◆ A plurality of Americans also believes that supporters of the Christian Right are not potentially violent (74 percent) and that they pose no threat to society (71 percent).
- ◆ While Americans generally give the benefit of the doubt to the Christian Right, a majority of Americans also believe that the terms "democratic" (53 percent) and "mainstream" (55 percent) do not describe the Christian Right well; and, in addition, that the terms "extremist" (55 percent) and "intolerant" (57 percent) do describe the Christian Right well.
- ◆ The majority of Americans also view the Christian Right's leadership unfavorably: Pat Robertson – 57 percent unfavorable; Oliver North – 59 percent unfavorable; Patrick Buchanan – 63 percent unfavorable.
- ◆ A substantial minority (between 20 and 30 percent) of the population consistently regards this movement in the worst possible terms. These are the same people (25 percent) who are least likely to support a candidate associated with conservative Christian politics. The most consistent and most hostile of these Americans are members of the social elite.

### *The Gay Community*

20. The *Survey of American Political Culture* confirms the public's increasing acceptance of homosexuality, as shown in other surveys in recent years. As gay activists pursue the recognition of rights and the acceptance of their "lifestyle," the American public seems be adapting to these demands while holding on to certain conservative instincts.
- ◆ Only one-third of the population now thinks that homosexuality is "morally wrong and should not be legally tolerat-

ed," compared to higher levels of disapproval found in previous surveys. In answer to a similar question, just over one-fourth (27 percent) of Americans agrees that homosexuality should be against the law, while 64 percent disagrees.

- ◆ However, about two-thirds of those surveyed disagreed with the assertion that homosexuals should have the right to marry, and the same number disagreed with the statement that homosexuals should have the right to adopt children.
- ◆ In contrast, on matters of public life, there was considerable support for an expansion of homosexual rights: roughly half of the population (48 percent) agreed that homosexuals have the right to serve openly in the military, and disagreed (51 percent) with the argument that landlords who are morally opposed to homosexuality should not be required to rent to homosexuals.
- ◆ In answering each of these questions, the young, the well-educated, the politically independent, the religiously liberal, and the secular tended to be more open to homosexuality as an acceptable practice and alternative lifestyle than other segments of the American population. However, even cultural conservatives tended to shy away from making severe spiritual judgments about homosexuality. Seventy percent of survey respondents disagreed with the assertion that "AIDS is God's way of punishing homosexuals," for example.

### *The Politics of Paranoia*

21. The survey also explored the characteristics of those individuals who fundamentally dislike the American system of government, who are extremely pessimistic about America today, and who subscribe wholeheartedly to all manner of conspiracy theory.
- ◆ Approximately 25-30 percent of all Americans endorse the idea that our national government works against the

interests of the American citizenry. Most benignly formulated, these individuals believe that the government only looks out for its own interests. Three out of four Americans (77 percent) agree with the statement that "The government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves." (Twenty-nine percent completely agrees.)

- ◆ Similarly, 63 percent of the population says that America's governing elite is "only concerned about its own agenda." This same percentage agrees that "Our country is run by a close network of special interests, public officials, and the media." (Twenty-five percent completely agrees.)
- ◆ A smaller number of American citizens, however, has an even more malevolent view of the US government. These citizens believe that our national leaders are actually conspiring against the citizenry. Fully one-fifth of the American population (20 percent) agrees that the people who run our society's major institutions are "involved in a conspiracy."
- ◆ Rounding out this portrait of suspicion, most Americans (63 percent) say they have little or no confidence that the people who run our government will tell the truth to the public. (Twenty-four percent, one quarter of the nation's population, admits that it has "no confidence at all.")
- ◆ When we incorporate these data into a simple "conspiracy index," it is possible to isolate those individuals who are most suspicious of their government and its leaders. Of the two-thirds to three-quarters of Americans who generally suspect that the government is run by selfish big interests, only a minority repeatedly expresses unequivocal conspiratorial allegations. Still, one quarter of the American population holds consistent convictions about conspiracy; one out of every ten Americans *strongly* subscribes to this view.

22. A number of basic demographic characteristics (among them gender, race/ethnicity, and age) have little or no connection to per-

ceptions of a conspiracy. While socioeconomic standing certainly affects the language one uses to frame and communicate conspiratorial notions, socioeconomic standing seems to be related only marginally to the extent of one's conspiratorial outlook.

- ◆ Conspiracy assertions are more common in families where the primary wage earner holds a low to mid-level white-collar occupation than among blue collar workers and professionals. Three of every ten respondents living in a home with a business-managerial or clerical-sales main occupation perceive at least some degree of governmental conspiracy. This compares with 21 percent of unskilled laborers and 22 percent of professionals.
- ◆ Americans from towns of less than 10,000 residents (especially those towns located in or near metropolitan areas) were strikingly harsh in their assessments of the government. Fully one-third (31 percent) of these Americans sees at least some governmental conspiracy, compared to 22 percent of those individuals living in cities of 50,000 or more.
- ◆ Strong suspicions of conspiracy flourish in the West, fade as they move East, and perish on their trek across the Alleghenies. In short, the more physically distant a region is from the seat of national power, the more distrustful are its inhabitants.
- ◆ Members of the Christian Right are much more likely than non-politicized Evangelicals to perceive a conspiracy among the governing elite. Forty-two percent of the Christian Right see at least some conspiracy, compared to 28 percent of all other Evangelicals.
- ◆ The greatest commitment to conspiracy theories is found at opposite ends of the ideological spectrum. Those who describe their political views as "far left" and "very liberal," and those who describe their political ideology as "very conservative" and "far right," are significantly more likely than moderates (including those who

describe their political ideology as “somewhat liberal” and “somewhat conservative”) to hold strong conspiratorial views.

23. Those who perceive that “the government is against the people” are likely to lament a decline in the quality of America’s national leaders and to call for congressional term limits. Those who harbor fears of a governmental conspiracy are also likely to oppose restrictions on the sale and use of handguns and to favor reductions in the size of the Federal government.
- ◆ However, the suspicion that those in charge of the government are entirely self-seeking does not lead “strong conspiracy” types to reject the American system as a whole or withdraw from political participation altogether. Individuals who subscribe to conspiracy theories are as likely as anyone to say that the US is the greatest country in the world.
  - ◆ Not only are those who suspect an elite conspiracy likely to vote, but they are actually more engaged politically than other Americans, in that they show evidence of writing letters and discussing politics to a greater degree.

## The Contradictions of American Political Culture

24. The Survey shows strongly that there are at least two distinct dynamics at play within American political culture: the ideal and the substantive. The ideal of political culture is defined by its mythic vitality and the substance of political culture is defined by the actual operation of the political system. Both are important normative features shaping the give and take of political life in America today.
- ◆ In our society today 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 the sense of the nation’s noble legacy, its great achievements, and its yet unfulfilled promise.

- ◆ The substance of American political culture, however, is marked by a deep pessimism about the way things are going, a trenchant disaffection from the large scale political institutions that order collective life, and a barely restrained cynicism toward a political leadership that symbolizes those institutions and attempts to lead them.
- ◆ There is remarkable consensus within *both* dimensions of American political culture today. The tension seems to derive from the fact that they exist in contradiction to each other. High-mindedness and cynicism co-exist; idealism and exasperation abide side by side.

### *The Middle Class Fear of Insignificance*

25. The contradictions uncovered in the survey vary in intensity. What is perhaps most striking is that the contradictions are most broadly represented, not in the fringe, not among minorities, and not so much among the poor, and poorly educated, but rather in the white middle classes.
- ◆ The middle classes are significant in part because they sense that they have much to lose. But what is at stake? The *Survey on American Political Culture* shows 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*.

- ◆ 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 it is being taken away—in part by the ineptitude of the nation's political leadership; in part by the machinations of the governing elite.
- ◆ The consequences of this middle class discontent are not trivial. When the middle classes retreat into disaffection, the vitality of those civic institutions can only be weakened.

### *Final Thoughts*

26. The contradictions uncovered in American political culture pose significant challenges for leaders and citizens alike.
  - ◆ The disaffection with national political institutions and the elites who run them seems to be *structural*—largely a function of the size of political institutions, the natural foibles and failures of its leaders (under the spotlight of the national media), the abstraction in how the system now operates, and perhaps most impor-

tantly, the distance Americans feel from them. High-mindedness toward the American creed and pique at leaders are irrevocably bound together.

- ◆ While some groups on the extremes have responded to the contradictions by adhering to conspiracy theories and participating in violent opposition, the disaffection of the middle classes is more troubling. The fear of insignificance—that their way of life is being eroded and becoming less viable—demonstrable among the core middle classes also raises questions about the long-term commitment of a majority of Americans to the American experiment.
- ◆ Strong tensions also exist, in moral terms, between significant active groups on the American political scene. The social and political significance of the social elites and the Christian Right is that they each offer opposing languages of public discourse and more than that, two distinct directions by which Americans can resolve the contradictions of political culture. This is a stark illustration of the divisions in American political culture.
- ◆ The critical question is obvious: is this situation sustainable over time?