

Working Paper

# CULTURE AND POLITICS IN AMERICA: THE DYNAMIC INTERPLAY FROM THE 1950'S TO TODAY



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# Culture and Politics in America: Their Dynamic Interplay from the 1950s to Today

By Don Iannone, PhD

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*"There is a cult of ignorance in the United States, and there has always been. The strain of anti-intellectualism has been a constant thread winding its way through our political and cultural life, nurtured by the false notion that democracy means that 'my ignorance is just as good as your knowledge.'"*

— Isaac Asimov, Newsweek Magazine, January 21, 1980

## I. Introduction

### A. Reason for this Paper

In July 2024, my book *America's Dream at a Crossroads, The 2024 Presidential Election and Beyond* was released. I was interviewed over fifty times by various national media sources about the book's ideas and their relevance to the election and beyond. The book was applauded for its evenhanded treat of both candidates for the presidency. The book provided a dozen detailed recommendations on policy actions the next President and Congress should take to improve the federal government, including proposals for campaign finance reform and placing well-defined limits on lobbying, creation of a legitimate third political party, ending celebrity politics and recruiting qualified candidates to run for political office, institute government reforms to improve efficiency and restore trust in government, reducing the federal debt, increasing oversight and transparency in all branches (executive, legislative, and judicial) of the federal government, developing integrated strategies for improvement of domestic and international affairs, and implementing a clear investment strategy to make America's Dream more achievable for all Americans. Some of the book's ideas were given attention by Republicans and Democrats. Writing the American Dream book prepared me to write this working paper.

Donald Trump won the 2024 election. With breakneck speed and ruthless precision, Trump is bulldozing through federal norms, dismantling decades of institutional stability in a matter of weeks and reshaping the government into a machine that bends entirely to his will. This is far from a democratic approach to governance. From sweeping executive orders to mass firings of bureaucratic officials, his administration is executing a political blitzkrieg, gutting regulatory agencies, consolidating power, and fast-tracking policies that would have once taken years to implement. The federal bureaucracy has been long overdue for reform, which is a major point made in *America's Dream at a Crossroads*. What was once the slow, bureaucratic machinery of the federal government is now a battlefield of rapid-fire restructuring, where Trump's iron-fisted agenda is obliterating opposition, reordering priorities, and redefining the very foundation of American governance.

***In a few words, too much too fast, posing existential threats to our nation's democracy.***

This working paper argues that all Americans, right, left, center, and those with no declared political affiliation need to remind themselves of how culture shapes politics and vice versa. This paper reminds all of us of the threat of allowing one-sided politics to singlehandedly dictate culture to Americans and allowing politics to define Americans' cultural choices. Consider this paper a history lesson on the persisting, yet changing, relationship between culture and politics in America since the 1950s. Consider it a clarion call for protecting and strengthening, not sidestepping or dismantling, American democracy.

## **B. Purpose and Scope of the Paper**

The purpose of this paper is to examine the dynamic interplay between culture and politics in the United States from the post-World War II era (1950s) through the present day (2025). This analysis explores how cultural shifts, beliefs, and practices have influenced political ideologies, decisions, and movements, as well as how political developments have reciprocally shaped and redefined American culture. The paper will provide historical context, particularly focusing on major cultural and political transformations from the 1950s through the 1980s. A closer examination will follow, exploring the intensified interplay between culture and politics from the 1990s into the early 21st century, giving particular attention to the increased polarization and extremism observed during the 2010s and early 2020s. By understanding these dynamics, the paper aims to shed light on potential future scenarios and suggest pathways for fostering greater political stability and cultural reconciliation.

## **B. Definition of Key Terms**

### **1. Culture**

Culture refers to the complex set of shared attitudes, values, goals, practices, and artifacts that characterize a group, community, or society. It encompasses language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music, arts, and other forms of symbolic expression that shape a group's identity and ways of understanding the world (Hall, 1997). Culture provides the context in which social interactions and meanings are constructed and continuously evolve over time (Williams, 1983).

### **2. Politics**

Politics is the process through which groups and individuals make collective decisions, manage resources, and exercise power within a community or society. It involves the creation and enforcement of laws, policies, governance structures, and the distribution of authority and influence (Heywood, 2019). Politics encompasses the activities associated

with governance, policy formulation, political participation, and conflict resolution. Politics exists within culture and not outside it.

### **3. Political Culture**

Political culture is the set of shared beliefs, values, norms, and attitudes about politics and governance that inform political behavior within a society. It shapes public expectations about government roles, political participation, civic responsibility, and the legitimacy of political systems (Almond & Verba, 1963). Political culture is transmitted through family, education, media, and other social institutions, significantly influencing how individuals and groups interact with the political system.

#### **C. Overview of Interplay Between Culture and Politics**

American culture and its political culture are far from homogeneous; they are an intricate tapestry woven from diverse regional, demographic, historical, and ideological threads. This complexity is evident in the multitude of perspectives and traditions that coexist—from the urban, progressive enclaves on the coasts to the more conservative, rural heartlands—each contributing distinct values and experiences. The resulting dynamic not only challenges broad generalizations but also fuels the ongoing debates and evolution of what it means to be American (Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope, 2006).

The interplay between culture and politics in America represents a complex, bidirectional, multifaceted relationship where each continuously shapes and informs the other. American political culture, distinctly characterized by core values such as democracy, liberty, individualism, equality, and capitalism, reflects historical narratives and collective societal experiences, including the American Revolution, westward expansion, and civil rights struggles (Lipset, 1996). These cultural foundations provide the context within which political attitudes are formed, influencing voting behavior, policy preferences, and ideological orientations.

Simultaneously, political events, decisions, and movements significantly impact American culture, reinforcing or challenging prevailing societal norms and identities. For instance, legislative acts such as the Civil Rights Act (1964) and Supreme Court decisions like *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015), which legalized same-sex marriage, have reshaped societal attitudes toward race, gender, and sexuality, contributing to cultural evolution and societal acceptance (Putnam, 2020).

Moreover, American politics often reflect cultural anxieties and values, leading to profound divisions and societal debates commonly referred to as "culture wars." These debates encompass contentious issues such as immigration, gun control, reproductive rights, and education policy, highlighting deep-seated cultural differences and their political

implications. The role of media, especially digital and social media platforms, has amplified these cultural divisions, facilitating echo chambers and intensifying ideological polarization (Benkler, Faris, & Roberts, 2018).

Ultimately, this continuous interplay between culture and politics shapes the American social fabric, impacting the functionality and stability of democratic institutions. Understanding this dynamic is crucial for addressing current political polarization and fostering a more cohesive and inclusive political environment.

America's political culture—with its deep-rooted narratives of individualism, rugged independence, and a persistent ideal of democracy—can be illuminated through the lens of political anthropology by examining the symbols, rituals, and myths that shape civic identity. This perspective reveals that polarization in America is not merely a clash of policy preferences but a contest over meaning, where symbols like the flag, national anthem, and the myth of the American Dream serve as powerful cultural signifiers that both unite and divide communities, mediating power and identity in everyday life (Baker, 2015).

Furthermore, political anthropology frames the rising polarization as the product of historical legacies, economic disparities, and the transformative influence of modern media landscapes that reshape our collective narratives. This approach contends that political divisions are deeply embedded in culturally transmitted practices and rituals, where traditions and symbolic struggles over national identity play as crucial a role as electoral politics. In this light, the fragmented nature of American political life becomes a web of contested meanings, offering a richer, more nuanced understanding of polarization as both a cultural and political phenomenon (Brown, 2018).

To what extent are Americans aware of the interplay between culture and politics? Recent survey research suggests that a substantial majority of Americans recognize that cultural factors play a significant role in shaping political opinions and outcomes. For example, a 2020 survey conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) found that approximately 70% of Americans believe that cultural issues—such as values, lifestyle choices, and social norms—strongly influence political debates and decision-making processes (Public Religion Research Institute, 2020). Similarly, Gallup (2021) reported that about 72% of respondents indicated that cultural conflicts are an important factor in the country's political landscape. These findings reflect the growing public awareness of the interplay between culture and politics, which has been driven by increasingly polarized views on social issues, identity politics, and the rapid changes in American cultural norms.

## **II. Historical Context (1950s-1980s)**

### **A. 1950s: Post-WWII Cultural Optimism and Conformity**

#### **1. Suburbanization and the Rise of Consumer Culture**

Following World War II, America experienced unprecedented economic growth, leading to widespread cultural optimism characterized by prosperity, stability, and conformity. Central to this period was the phenomenon of suburbanization—the mass movement of families from urban centers into rapidly developing suburban communities. Fueled by government incentives such as the GI Bill, favorable mortgage programs, and federal highway projects, suburban growth symbolized the American Dream of home ownership, security, and family stability (Jackson, 1985).

This migration profoundly influenced American culture by fostering a collective ideal of conformity and uniformity. The suburbs became cultural incubators for a growing middle class, where similar houses, lifestyles, and values proliferated, reflecting and reinforcing the era's dominant cultural norms (Cohen, 2003). Suburbia also became the epicenter for the rise of consumer culture, driven by increased disposable income, mass production, and targeted marketing strategies. Television advertising and popular media promoted a consumer-driven lifestyle focused on material abundance, comfort, and convenience, reshaping American values around consumption and economic aspiration (Lizabeth, 2010).

Politically, suburban growth solidified a stable, politically conservative base emphasizing individualism, family values, and anti-communist sentiment, significantly shaping political ideologies during this decade and beyond (Jackson, 1985). Thus, suburbanization and consumer culture during the 1950s not only reshaped the American cultural landscape but also profoundly influenced the political ethos of the period.

#### **2. The Cold War and Anti-Communist Sentiment**

The Cold War significantly shaped American culture and politics throughout the 1950s, infusing society with intense anti-communist sentiment and pervasive anxiety about national security. This era witnessed ideological competition between capitalist democratic values championed by the United States and communist ideologies promoted by the Soviet Union. Politically, anti-communism became a powerful mobilizing force, fostering bipartisan consensus around containing Soviet influence and reinforcing traditional American values of democracy, liberty, and capitalism (Whitfield, 1991).

Domestically, anti-communist fervor led to heightened suspicion and surveillance, epitomized by the activities of Senator Joseph McCarthy, whose aggressive campaigns against alleged communists in government, media, academia, and entertainment

industries profoundly impacted American culture. The era's political climate fostered an atmosphere of conformity, censorship, and fear, profoundly influencing the artistic and intellectual output and stifling dissent (Schrecker, 2002).

Culturally, the Cold War narrative deeply influenced popular media, literature, and education, perpetuating a dichotomous worldview of "us versus them," democracy versus totalitarianism. Films, television programs, literature, and educational curricula were heavily infused with patriotic themes, reflecting and reinforcing prevailing anti-communist sentiments and national pride (Belmonte, 2008).

This period solidified anti-communist ideology as a core component of American political culture, shaping the country's approach to foreign and domestic policy for decades. The legacy of this ideological battle continues to influence contemporary American politics and cultural identity.

### **3. Politics of Conformity and Stability Under Eisenhower**

The presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower (1953–1961) was emblematic of the 1950s' politics of conformity, stability, and cautious moderation. Eisenhower's administration was defined by its deliberate avoidance of ideological extremes, prioritizing political consensus and national unity during a period characterized by Cold War anxieties and rapid social transformation. His approach, often referred to as "Modern Republicanism," sought to balance conservative fiscal management with moderate social policies, steering a middle course intended to appeal broadly across the American populace (Pach & Richardson, 1991).

Culturally, Eisenhower's politics of conformity aligned closely with the era's widespread preference for social stability, economic growth, and ideological uniformity. Politically, this translated into minimal intervention in existing social structures, cautious domestic reforms, and a reluctance to challenge entrenched social norms, particularly around race and gender. Eisenhower avoided direct confrontation on controversial social issues such as civil rights, although significant events like the 1954 Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* required federal responses that slowly began reshaping American society (Ambrose, 1990).

The Eisenhower administration's policies also reinforced cultural conformity through a strong commitment to national security, which emphasized unity and discouraged dissent. The cultural landscape of the 1950s, marked by a pronounced emphasis on patriotism, middle-class values, and anti-communist consensus, complemented Eisenhower's cautious approach to governance, further embedding conformity within the American political and cultural psyche (Griffith, 1982).



Thus, the Eisenhower era embodied a period in American history where political stability and cultural conformity mutually reinforced one another, shaping a distinct period of American political culture with lasting implications for subsequent decades.

## **B. 1960s: Cultural Upheaval and Political Activism**

### **1. Civil Rights Movement and its Political Implications**

The 1960s marked a profound period of cultural upheaval and political activism in the United States, epitomized by the Civil Rights Movement. This movement challenged deeply ingrained racial inequalities and discriminatory practices, reshaping American culture and significantly altering the political landscape. Rooted in decades of systematic discrimination, the Civil Rights Movement mobilized millions of Americans in pursuit of social justice, equality, and the full realization of constitutional rights for African Americans and other marginalized groups (Carson, 1998).

Politically, the movement led to landmark legislative and judicial achievements, notably the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. These legislative milestones, championed by leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and grassroots organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), dramatically transformed American democracy by expanding political participation and reinforcing federal commitments to civil rights enforcement (Morris, 1999).

Culturally, the Civil Rights Movement fostered a broader national consciousness about race, inequality, and social justice. It influenced various other social movements, including feminism, anti-war activism, and later LGBTQ rights advocacy, creating a political culture increasingly attuned to social justice and equality (McAdam, 1999). Additionally, the media played a critical role by broadcasting powerful images and narratives from key events, such as the March on Washington and the Selma to Montgomery marches, galvanizing public opinion and intensifying political pressure on policymakers (Robnett, 1996).

The Civil Rights Movement's legacy continues to impact American politics and culture, laying essential groundwork for ongoing debates around race relations, systemic racism, and social policy.

### **2. Vietnam War and Anti-War Activism**

The Vietnam War (1955–1975), particularly intensified in the 1960s, significantly shaped American cultural and political landscapes, catalyzing a wave of political activism and widespread cultural dissent. Initially framed within the context of Cold War anti-communism, U.S. involvement gradually became deeply controversial, fueling extensive domestic unrest and dramatically reshaping American politics (Hall, 2004).

In politics, anti-war activism emerged as a powerful and polarizing force, influencing elections, governmental policies, and public opinion. The war's unpopularity eroded trust in political leadership, notably affecting the Johnson and Nixon administrations. Public protests, teach-ins, and massive demonstrations, notably the 1969 Moratorium to End the War in Vietnam, directly pressured policymakers to reconsider foreign policy decisions, marking a significant shift in political engagement and accountability (DeBenedetti, 1990).

Cultural opposition to the Vietnam War represented a broader challenge to American values, norms, and authority. The movement intertwined with countercultural expressions, emphasizing peace, civil liberties, and questioning institutional legitimacy. Anti-war sentiment became embedded in popular music, literature, film, and the arts, reflecting widespread disillusionment and contributing to a profound generational divide (Gitlin, 2003).

The legacy of Vietnam-era activism permanently altered American political culture by embedding skepticism toward government authority and military interventions, setting the stage for enduring debates over U.S. foreign policy, patriotism, and the limits of governmental power.

### **3. Counterculture and Rise of Liberal Social Movements**

The 1960s in America witnessed the rise of a vibrant counterculture that challenged prevailing social norms and significantly reshaped political discourse. Emerging largely as a response to mainstream conservative cultural expectations and institutional authority, this counterculture was characterized by an embrace of individual freedom, experimentation, and radical critiques of traditional values (Roszak, 1969). Central to this movement was a generational shift that rejected conformity, consumerism, and established hierarchies, advocating instead for peace, civil rights, gender equality, environmental consciousness, and broader social reform (Farber, 2003).

The counterculture movement found expression in various liberal social movements, including the feminist movement, environmentalism, LGBTQ rights advocacy, and anti-war activism. Feminist activism, exemplified by Betty Friedan's seminal work *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), ignited widespread advocacy for women's rights, contributing to political mobilization for equal rights legislation and significantly reshaping gender relations in America (Evans, 2003). Environmental awareness likewise surged during this period, culminating in policy developments such as the establishment of Earth Day in 1970 and subsequent environmental legislation (Rome, 2003).

In the culture sphere, the counterculture influenced music, fashion, literature, and art, promoting alternative lifestyles and anti-establishment sentiments. Politically, it pressured governmental institutions, altering policy agendas and prompting legislative responses

addressing civil liberties, social justice, and environmental protections. While the counterculture itself began to wane by the end of the decade, its influence persisted, permanently embedding liberal values into American political and cultural landscapes (Gitlin, 2003).

## **C. 1970s: Disillusionment and Political Fragmentation**

### **1. Watergate and Loss of Faith in Institutions**

The Watergate scandal of the early 1970s represented a profound rupture in American political and cultural life, triggering widespread public disillusionment and loss of faith in governmental institutions. Originating with a burglary at the Democratic National Committee headquarters at the Watergate complex in 1972, the scandal rapidly unfolded to reveal extensive abuse of executive power under President Richard Nixon, including illegal surveillance, cover-ups, and obstruction of justice (Kutler, 1990).

Watergate culminated in Nixon's resignation in 1974, fundamentally shaking public confidence in political leadership and institutions. The exposure of governmental corruption, deceit, and misuse of power deeply eroded Americans' trust in their elected officials and the political system more broadly, resulting in lasting skepticism and increased demands for transparency and accountability (Schudson, 1992).

From a cultural standpoint, the Watergate scandal further deepened the national sense of disillusionment that was already prevalent due to the Vietnam War. This crisis profoundly altered American political culture, shifting public attitudes towards increased cynicism and disengagement from traditional political processes. The media's critical role in investigating and publicizing the scandal reinforced its position as a powerful political watchdog, significantly reshaping public perceptions of journalism and government accountability (Bernstein & Woodward, 1974).

The legacy of Watergate continues to influence American political culture, emphasizing accountability and transparency while sustaining a pervasive distrust toward governmental authority and institutions.

### **2. Economic Stagflation and Cultural Anxiety**

The 1970s in America were marked by significant economic difficulties, particularly stagflation—a combination of stagnant economic growth, high unemployment, and rising inflation. This economic turmoil disrupted the post-war optimism that characterized previous decades, leading to widespread cultural anxiety and deepening societal divisions (Stein, 2010).

In the world of economics, stagflation challenged established Keynesian economic theories, which struggled to explain simultaneous inflation and unemployment. The resulting uncertainty undermined public confidence in political and economic leadership, as policymakers struggled to manage persistent inflation and employment crises through traditional policy instruments (Blinder & Rudd, 2013).

In the world of culture, the economic hardship of the 1970s intensified anxieties around economic security, the stability of the American Dream, and declining global dominance. These anxieties were exacerbated by events such as the oil crises of 1973 and 1979, highlighting vulnerabilities in American economic and foreign policy. The cultural mood shifted towards pessimism, fostering skepticism towards government effectiveness, and intensifying ideological divides over issues such as welfare, taxation, and labor rights (Cowie, 2010).

The economic and cultural anxieties of the 1970s significantly reshaped the American political landscape, fueling the emergence of conservative movements that promised restoration of economic stability and cultural confidence. These conditions paved the way for the conservative resurgence in subsequent decades, profoundly altering American political culture and priorities.

### **3. Emergence of Conservative Backlash**

The 1970s witnessed the rise of a significant conservative backlash, largely as a response to the rapid social and cultural changes of the 1960s and the economic and political instability of the era. This conservative resurgence represented a reaction against perceived cultural liberalism, the expansion of governmental authority, and progressive social policies that conservatives argued undermined traditional American values, such as family, religion, and individual responsibility (Critchlow, 2007).

Politically, this backlash coalesced into a powerful movement characterized by renewed advocacy for limited government, traditional social norms, free-market capitalism, and strong national defense. Influential organizations such as the Moral Majority, founded by evangelical leader Jerry Falwell, mobilized conservative voters around issues like opposition to abortion, resistance to feminist and LGBTQ rights movements, and support for school prayer and religious expression in public life (Williams, 2010).

The conservative movement's cultural appeal drew strength from widespread anxieties about moral decline, the breakdown of traditional family structures, and perceptions of eroded patriotism exacerbated by the Vietnam War and Watergate scandal. Within the political landscape, it reshaped party platforms, facilitated the election of conservative leaders such as Ronald Reagan in 1980, and established an ideological framework that profoundly influenced American politics for decades (Perlstein, 2008).

The emergence of this conservative backlash thus reflected a deep-seated cultural reaction against liberal reforms, significantly redirecting American political culture toward conservatism, with lasting impacts on contemporary political discourse and policy-making.

## **D. 1980s: Conservative Resurgence and Cultural Polarization**

### **1. Reaganomics and Its Cultural Dimensions**

The 1980s were defined politically by the presidency of Ronald Reagan, whose economic policies—popularly termed "Reaganomics"—significantly reshaped both the American economy and cultural landscape. Reaganomics, grounded in supply-side economic theory, emphasized reducing taxes, deregulation, and reducing government spending on social programs to stimulate economic growth and investment (Bartels, 2008).

From a cultural perspective, Reaganomics signified a revival of individualism, entrepreneurial spirit, and optimism, aligning closely with Reagan's political rhetoric of American exceptionalism and renewed national pride. This economic philosophy resonated culturally with many Americans, particularly those disillusioned by the economic stagnation and social unrest of the previous decade (Phillips-Fein, 2009). Reagan's policies reinforced values of self-reliance, economic freedom, and consumerism, shaping American culture around the ideal of individual success and wealth accumulation.

However, Reaganomics also intensified cultural polarization by exacerbating economic inequalities, which significantly impacted social cohesion. Critics argued that the economic prosperity of the era disproportionately benefited affluent segments of society while deepening disparities and diminishing support for disadvantaged populations (Wilentz, 2008). This growing economic divide amplified cultural and political debates over poverty, welfare, and racial equity, laying the groundwork for ongoing ideological conflicts.

Ultimately, Reaganomics was more than an economic policy; it was a cultural phenomenon that reaffirmed conservative ideals, redefined the relationship between government and citizens, and entrenched societal divisions that would shape American politics and culture for decades.

### **2. Rise of Evangelical Christianity in Politics**

The 1980s witnessed the prominent rise of evangelical Christianity as a significant force in American politics, reshaping both political discourse and cultural debates. Central figures such as Jerry Falwell, founder of the Moral Majority, and influential politicians like Newt Gingrich played critical roles in aligning evangelical voters with conservative political movements, significantly influencing electoral outcomes and policy agendas (Balmer, 2014).

The Moral Majority, established in 1979, became instrumental in mobilizing evangelical Christians around culturally conservative issues, including opposition to abortion, LGBTQ rights, and secularism in public education. This political mobilization marked a deliberate effort to insert religiously informed moral values directly into political advocacy and legislative action, aligning evangelical beliefs with conservative policies and electoral strategies (Williams, 2010).

Newt Gingrich further consolidated this conservative coalition through aggressive political strategy and rhetoric, promoting a narrative that framed evangelical Christianity as essential to American identity and morality. His role in the political ascension of evangelical values, particularly through initiatives such as the "Contract with America," reflected and reinforced deep cultural divides concerning family structures, morality, and the role of religion in public life (Gillon, 2008).

Thus, the rise of evangelical Christianity in the political realm during the 1980s significantly deepened cultural polarization in America. The lasting influence of these movements continues to shape contemporary American politics, framing ongoing cultural conflicts and ideological debates.

Estimates from the Pew Research Center suggest that approximately 25% of American adults identify as evangelical Protestants (Pew Research Center, 2015). This figure translates to roughly 80–90 million people when considering the total adult population of the United States. Evangelical Christians are generally defined by their commitment to the authority of the Bible, the need for personal conversion, and active expression of their faith in both public and private life. In addition, many conservative Christians—who may include evangelical Protestants along with other groups such as fundamentalist or historically conservative mainline Protestants—comprise an even larger share of the population, with some estimates suggesting that altogether they account for around 30% or more of American adults (Pew Research Center, 2015).

These numbers are significant because they underscore the substantial influence that evangelical and conservative Christians have on U.S. politics and culture. Their views on issues like abortion, religious liberty, and education, for example, have consistently shaped policy debates and electoral outcomes. Given that these groups tend to lean strongly toward Republican candidates, their demographic weight plays an important role in shaping the results of national elections.

### **3. Cultural Debates on Race, Gender, and Sexuality**

The 1980s were marked by intense cultural debates centered on race, gender, and sexuality, reflecting broader tensions in American society. These debates emerged in response to rapid social transformations and were intensified by the conservative political climate of the

Reagan era. Issues of affirmative action, feminism, LGBTQ rights, and cultural representation became focal points of conflict, underscoring deep ideological divides.

On racial issues, the Reagan administration's policies stirred significant controversy, particularly regarding affirmative action and welfare reform. Critics argued that Reagan's policies disproportionately disadvantaged communities of color, intensifying racial inequalities. These policy debates highlighted deep divisions over racial justice and equality, particularly in the context of economic policies and social welfare (Omi & Winant, 1994).

Gender politics during this decade saw considerable backlash against feminist gains of the previous decades. The rise of conservative activists, including Phyllis Schlafly, intensified resistance to feminist initiatives such as the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). These debates underscored broader cultural anxieties about shifting gender roles, family structures, and the perceived threat to traditional values posed by feminism (Faludi, 1991).

Regarding sexuality, the AIDS crisis significantly shaped cultural and political debates throughout the 1980s. Initially met with widespread stigma and political indifference, the crisis eventually galvanized activism, leading to greater visibility for LGBTQ rights movements. Cultural and political battles around sexuality reflected broader conservative resistance to recognizing LGBTQ rights and identities, positioning sexuality as a highly polarized cultural issue (Gould, 2009).

Recent national surveys provide a current estimate for the number of Americans who identify as LGBTQ. According to a Gallup poll conducted in 2022, approximately 7.1% of American adults identify as LGBTQ (Gallup, 2022). This percentage represents a notable increase from earlier estimates and reflects changing social attitudes as well as improved survey methodologies that better capture a range of sexual orientations and gender identities. Such figures underscore the growing visibility of LGBTQ Americans, which in turn has implications for political, social, and cultural policy discussions.

Thus, cultural debates on race, gender, and sexuality during the 1980s not only underscored deep-seated ideological divisions but also set the stage for ongoing struggles over civil rights and cultural representation.

### **III. Cultural-Political Overview (1990s-2000s)**

#### **A. 1990s: Economic Prosperity and Cultural Battles**

##### **1. Clinton Presidency and Cultural Liberalization**

The presidency of Bill Clinton (1993–2001) coincided with a period of significant economic prosperity and notable cultural liberalization in America. Under Clinton's administration, America experienced robust economic growth characterized by reduced unemployment,

balanced budgets, and technological innovation, particularly with the rise of the internet and the expansion of global trade agreements (Greenberg, 2016). This economic boom provided fertile ground for cultural shifts, as increased prosperity fostered openness toward diverse cultural expressions and progressive social values.

In the political arena, the Clinton administration navigated significant cultural conflicts, often referred to as the ongoing "culture wars," addressing contentious issues such as abortion rights, LGBTQ inclusion, gun control, and affirmative action. Clinton's moderate yet socially liberal stance was exemplified through key legislative and policy initiatives, including the controversial "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" military policy and the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), both reflecting uneasy compromises between cultural conservatism and liberal values (Chauncey, 2004).

Culturally, the Clinton years saw an acceleration of liberalization, reflected in increased visibility and acceptance of diverse racial, ethnic, and sexual identities in mainstream media and popular culture. Yet, these cultural advances also provoked intense conservative backlash, exemplified by political confrontations like Newt Gingrich's "Contract with America," which aimed to reclaim cultural and political ground for conservative values (Gillon, 2008).

The Clinton era thus represents a complex interplay between economic prosperity, progressive cultural trends, and conservative resistance, setting the stage for intensified cultural polarization that would define American politics into the twenty-first century.

## **2. Technological Advancements and Globalization**

The 1990s marked a pivotal era defined by rapid technological advancements and intensified globalization, both of which significantly impacted American culture and politics. The explosive growth of the internet, personal computing, and mobile communication technologies revolutionized information dissemination, social interactions, and economic activities, creating unprecedented connectivity on a global scale (Castells, 1996).

In a political sense, globalization became a contentious issue, reflecting deep ideological divides about trade policies, economic sovereignty, and labor rights. The Clinton administration's advocacy of free trade, exemplified by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the establishment of the World Trade Organization (WTO), symbolized America's deeper integration into a global economic system (Stiglitz, 2002). These policies, while contributing to economic expansion and corporate prosperity, provoked significant domestic debates concerning job security, wage stagnation, and economic inequality.



In terms of culture, globalization and technology fostered increased exposure to diverse cultures, accelerating cultural exchange but also sparking resistance rooted in fears of cultural dilution and loss of traditional American identities. Technological advancements amplified these cultural tensions, as digital media became a battleground for cultural debates on issues such as immigration, multiculturalism, and national identity (Barber, 1995).

Thus, the interplay between technological innovation and globalization in the 1990s reshaped both American culture and politics, laying the groundwork for intensified cultural polarization and political debates that continue into the present day.

### **3. Culture Wars: Debates on Multiculturalism, Immigration, and Identity Politics**

The 1990s intensified America's cultural and political conflicts, frequently termed the "culture wars," as debates over multiculturalism, immigration, and identity politics took center stage. These debates reflected deep divisions over America's cultural identity, societal values, and the demographic changes reshaping the nation.

Multiculturalism emerged as a contested issue, with proponents advocating recognition of America's diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural heritage in education and public life. Opponents, however, perceived multicultural policies as fragmenting national unity and undermining traditional American values and assimilation efforts (Schlesinger, 1998). Educational curricula, affirmative action policies, and representation in media and public institutions became flashpoints for heated political and cultural debate.

Immigration policy also became increasingly polarized, particularly with surging immigration rates reshaping American demographics. The Immigration Act of 1990 significantly increased immigration quotas, leading to contentious public and political discourse. Advocates emphasized the economic and cultural benefits of diversity, whereas critics argued increased immigration threatened economic stability, cultural cohesion, and national security (Huntington, 2004).

Simultaneously, identity politics—focused on issues of race, gender, sexuality, and religion—expanded dramatically in influence and scope. Movements advocating for LGBTQ rights, gender equality, and racial justice gained prominence, catalyzing significant social change but also intensifying cultural backlash from conservative groups who viewed these changes as destabilizing traditional family structures and moral standards (Gitlin, 1995).

The cultural battles of the 1990s thus revealed deep ideological cleavages, significantly influencing the political landscape and laying the groundwork for further polarization into the 21st century.

## **B. 2000s: Security, Polarization, and Cultural Anxiety**

### **1. Post-9/11 Politics and Cultural Shift**

The terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 marked a transformative moment in American politics and culture, profoundly reshaping national priorities, public discourse, and cultural attitudes. In the immediate aftermath, politics became sharply centered around national security, counterterrorism, and homeland defense, significantly influencing governmental policies, legislative actions, and civic life (Chomsky, 2003).

The Bush administration implemented expansive measures through the Patriot Act, establishing new security protocols and surveillance capabilities aimed at preventing future terrorist attacks. These policies dramatically shifted the balance between civil liberties and security, generating intense political debates over individual rights, privacy, and government power (Cole, 2003).

In a cultural sense, 9/11 engendered widespread anxiety and fostered a heightened sense of patriotism, unity, and vulnerability. Yet, it also intensified suspicion toward ethnic and religious minorities, particularly Muslim Americans, exacerbating racial profiling, discrimination, and societal tensions. Media narratives amplified these cultural anxieties, contributing to a climate of fear and mistrust that influenced public perceptions and policy debates (Alsultany, 2012).

The post-9/11 era thus signaled a profound cultural shift toward security consciousness, patriotism, and intensified polarization, setting the stage for ongoing political conflicts centered on identity, immigration, and civil liberties that continue to resonate in American political culture today.

### **2. Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan: Cultural Divisions and Patriotism**

The U.S.-led wars in Afghanistan (beginning in 2001) and Iraq (beginning in 2003) profoundly shaped American political culture, intensifying both patriotism and cultural divisions within society. Initially, the military actions garnered broad public support, fueled by post-9/11 unity, patriotic fervor, and the political framing of the conflicts as critical battles in the broader "War on Terror." Symbolic gestures, such as flag displays, rallies supporting troops, and media narratives emphasizing national security, strengthened collective patriotic sentiments (Bacevich, 2016).

However, prolonged involvement in both conflicts, particularly the controversial invasion of Iraq, generated substantial domestic debate and polarized public opinion. Questions arose regarding government transparency, the legitimacy of intelligence used to justify military actions, and ethical concerns about human rights and civilian casualties. These debates

divided Americans politically and culturally, leading to widespread anti-war activism reminiscent of Vietnam-era dissent (Hayden, 2009).

Cultural divisions deepened as political identities increasingly aligned with positions on the wars. Conservatives often equated support for military actions with patriotism, while liberals critiqued the ethical and strategic validity of prolonged conflicts. Media representations amplified these divides, influencing public perceptions and intensifying ideological polarization (Kellner, 2010).

Thus, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan significantly reshaped American cultural and political landscapes, embedding enduring tensions related to military engagement, patriotism, national identity, and America's global role.

### **3. Economic Recession and Shifting Political Alignments**

The late 2000s witnessed a profound transformation in American politics and culture driven by the economic recession beginning in 2007 and peaking with the 2008 financial crisis. This economic downturn, widely recognized as the most severe since the Great Depression, dramatically reshaped American political discourse, policy priorities, and cultural narratives around economic security, social equity, and governmental responsibility.

Politically, the recession significantly altered electoral dynamics and voter alignments. The election of Barack Obama in 2008 symbolized a clear political shift driven largely by public dissatisfaction with economic conditions and a growing demand for governmental intervention and regulatory reform. Obama's presidency initially fostered optimism about progressive social and economic policies, exemplified by initiatives such as the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act and the Affordable Care Act (ACA), both reflecting renewed acceptance of government involvement in addressing systemic inequalities and providing economic stability (Alter, 2010).

However, this shift also provoked intense political backlash, laying the groundwork for increased polarization and the rise of conservative populism. The emergence of the Tea Party movement epitomized this reaction, criticizing expansive government intervention, excessive spending, and perceived threats to individual freedoms. This ideological divide was further amplified by media narratives and partisan politics, deepening the nation's cultural divisions along lines of class, race, and regional identity (Skocpol & Williamson, 2012).

Culturally, the recession intensified anxieties around economic stability, fairness, and the viability of the American Dream, prompting widespread questioning of America's foundational ideals of meritocracy and social mobility. The Occupy Wall Street movement, emerging in 2011, directly challenged growing economic inequality, highlighting disparities

between the wealthiest one percent and the broader population. This cultural discourse significantly impacted public conversations on economic justice, inequality, and corporate responsibility (Gitlin, 2012).

Ultimately, the economic crisis and its aftermath not only reshaped political alignments but also significantly altered American culture, fueling deeper social divisions and debates over the roles of government, market regulation, and economic justice that persist into the present.

## **IV. Detailed Analysis of Recent Decades (2010s-2025)**

### **A. 2010-2015: Cultural Fragmentation And Deepening Polarization**

#### **1. Rise of Social Media and New Media Landscapes**

The period from 2010 to 2015 marked a dramatic transformation in American politics and culture, largely driven by the explosive growth of social media and new media platforms. The rapid expansion and widespread adoption of digital communication reshaped public discourse, altering the ways in which Americans accessed, interpreted, and shared information, profoundly influencing political mobilization and cultural dynamics.

Prominent social media platforms—particularly Facebook, founded by Mark Zuckerberg; Twitter, initially led by Jack Dorsey; and YouTube, managed under Google’s leadership—emerged as dominant players reshaping the American political and cultural landscapes. These platforms enabled unprecedented levels of user interaction, content creation, and rapid dissemination of news and opinion, dramatically democratizing public dialogue (Van Dijck, 2013). However, their algorithms simultaneously contributed to echo chambers and intensified ideological polarization by amplifying sensationalized, emotionally charged, or partisan content (Pariser, 2011).

From a political standpoint, social media played a critical role in mobilizing grassroots movements, shaping electoral strategies, and influencing public opinion. Platforms like Twitter and Facebook became vital communication tools during political events, such as the rise of the Tea Party, the Occupy Wall Street movement, and the Black Lives Matter protests following incidents of police brutality. Influential new media figures such as Andrew Breitbart (founder of Breitbart News) and Arianna Huffington (founder of The Huffington Post) gained prominence by redefining news consumption through highly politicized, niche-oriented platforms that catered to specific ideological audiences.

Culturally, social media enabled the rapid dissemination of alternative narratives and empowered marginalized voices, creating space for previously underrepresented groups. However, it also deepened cultural fragmentation, as information increasingly flowed within

isolated ideological communities. Viral phenomena and meme culture further shaped political narratives, blurring lines between entertainment, news, and activism (Shifman, 2014).

Thus, the rise of social media and new media landscapes from 2010 to 2015 accelerated cultural fragmentation and deepened political polarization, reshaping American democracy by fundamentally transforming how citizens engage with politics and each other.

## **2. Tea Party Movement and Conservative Populism**

The Tea Party movement, emerging prominently between 2010 and 2015, represented a significant realignment within American conservatism, reshaping the Republican Party and intensifying national political divisions. Sparked initially by opposition to the economic stimulus policies and the Affordable Care Act (ACA) under President Barack Obama, this grassroots phenomenon channeled widespread frustration with government spending, taxation, and perceived encroachments on individual liberties into a powerful conservative populist force (Skocpol & Williamson, 2012).

Central figures within the Tea Party, such as Sarah Palin, Michele Bachmann, Ted Cruz, and Rand Paul, harnessed populist rhetoric emphasizing limited government, fiscal responsibility, and strict constitutional interpretation. This ideological resurgence resonated deeply with a base concerned by the economic recession's fallout, demographic changes, and a broader sense of declining American exceptionalism. Media platforms, notably Fox News under personalities like Glenn Beck and Sean Hannity, amplified the Tea Party's messaging, bolstering its national visibility and influence (Williamson, Skocpol, & Coggin, 2011).

The movement's rhetoric often emphasized patriotic symbolism, drawing on historical imagery such as the Boston Tea Party to frame contemporary political battles as existential struggles over America's foundational values. While this framing effectively mobilized voters and reshaped congressional dynamics—especially evident in the 2010 midterm elections—it also contributed significantly to political polarization, encouraging uncompromising stances and confrontational political tactics that deepened legislative gridlock (Parker & Barreto, 2014).

Moreover, the Tea Party's rise foreshadowed broader shifts toward nationalist and populist politics, laying the ideological groundwork for future developments in conservative politics, including the eventual ascendancy of Donald Trump. By reshaping conservative identity and discourse, the Tea Party fundamentally altered the trajectory of American politics, leaving lasting cultural and political impacts that continue to resonate.

### **3. Progressive Cultural Responses: Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter**

The period from 2010 to 2015 saw a powerful wave of progressive cultural activism, exemplified by movements such as Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter. These movements emerged as direct responses to economic inequalities, systemic injustices, and cultural frustrations intensified by the Great Recession and ongoing racial disparities.

Occupy Wall Street, initiated in 2011, mobilized around grievances related to economic injustice, corporate influence in politics, and widening wealth disparities. Characterized by the influential slogan “We are the 99%,” the movement catalyzed national attention toward economic inequality and corporate accountability. Occupy’s decentralized, consensus-driven model of organizing created a distinctive culture of grassroots activism that resonated broadly, despite its resistance to conventional political structures or explicit policy agendas (Gitlin, 2012). The movement significantly reshaped national discourse, drawing attention to wealth inequality and influencing subsequent political debates around taxation, financial regulation, and social equity.

Simultaneously, the rise of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement marked a critical juncture in addressing systemic racism, police brutality, and racial injustice. Founded by activists Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi in 2013 after the acquittal of Trayvon Martin’s shooter, George Zimmerman, BLM became a powerful force, amplifying awareness of racial inequities through both street demonstrations and sophisticated online activism. The deaths of individuals like Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and Sandra Bland further galvanized public attention and outrage, forcing issues of racial justice into mainstream political and cultural discussions (Taylor, 2016).

Both Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter leveraged digital and social media platforms to build extensive networks, mobilize supporters, and amplify marginalized voices. The cultural significance of these movements lay not only in their direct challenges to institutional inequalities but also in their profound impact on public consciousness, shifting conversations around economic and racial justice into mainstream American politics. Collectively, these movements underscored a critical period of progressive activism, reshaping contemporary American political and cultural landscapes and setting the stage for continued activism into the following decade.

### **B. 2016-2020: Political Upheaval And Cultural Realignment**

#### **1. Trump Presidency and Nationalist Populism**

The presidency of Donald Trump (2017–2021) marked a pivotal moment of political upheaval and cultural realignment in the United States, reflecting and amplifying existing societal tensions. Trump’s ascendancy symbolized a profound shift toward nationalist populism,

challenging traditional political norms and reshaping American cultural and political landscapes.

Trump's political rhetoric emphasized American exceptionalism, economic nationalism, immigration restriction, and skepticism toward global institutions and agreements. His slogan "Make America Great Again" encapsulated a nostalgic appeal to restore perceived cultural and economic losses, resonating strongly with voters feeling marginalized by rapid economic, cultural, and demographic changes (Inglehart & Norris, 2017). This messaging effectively harnessed cultural anxieties surrounding globalization, immigration, and identity, reinforcing divisions along cultural, racial, and geographic lines.

Trump's presidency also saw a marked departure from political norms through direct and confrontational communication, particularly via Twitter, where he frequently bypassed traditional media channels. This approach allowed Trump to set political agendas, shape cultural narratives, and mobilize his base directly, often at the expense of institutional credibility and bipartisanship (Ott & Dickinson, 2019).

Significantly, Trump's nationalist populism reshaped the Republican Party's ideological identity, prioritizing issues like border security, trade protectionism, and cultural conservatism. His administration's controversial policies—including travel bans targeting predominantly Muslim countries, aggressive immigration enforcement, and renegotiation of international agreements—generated substantial opposition, galvanizing progressive and moderate voters and prompting large-scale social mobilization and activism (Mudde, 2019).

Ultimately, Trump's presidency intensified polarization and cultural fragmentation, solidifying nationalist populism as a powerful and enduring force in American political culture. The legacy of his political approach continues to influence cultural debates and electoral strategies, highlighting deeper societal divides that remain central to American politics.

## **2. Cultural Tensions: Immigration, Race Relations, Gender Rights**

Between 2016 and 2020, intense cultural tensions surrounding immigration, race relations, and gender rights became increasingly central to American politics, significantly shaping public discourse and amplifying polarization. These tensions were deeply intertwined with broader national debates on identity, inclusion, and American values, exposing stark divides within society.

Immigration emerged as one of the most contentious issues, driven by aggressive policy shifts under the Trump administration, including enhanced border enforcement, attempts to end Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), and the controversial family separation policy at the U.S.-Mexico border. The political discourse around immigration

became deeply polarized, reflecting broader cultural anxieties about demographic shifts, economic security, and national identity (Abrajano & Hajnal, 2017). Pro-immigration advocates emphasized humanitarian values, diversity, and the economic benefits of immigration, while opponents framed immigration as a threat to American security, cultural cohesion, and economic prosperity.

Race relations further intensified as incidents of police brutality and systemic racism prompted widespread protests and national introspection. High-profile cases such as the killing of George Floyd in 2020 led to massive mobilizations under the Black Lives Matter movement, sparking global demonstrations against racial injustice and police violence. While these events elevated awareness of systemic racism and galvanized calls for reform, they simultaneously provoked significant cultural backlash, fueling opposition movements and amplifying existing racial divides (Taylor, 2019).

Gender rights also remained a fiercely contested cultural battleground during this period, with renewed debates over reproductive rights, gender equality, and LGBTQ+ protections. The Trump administration's policies included rollbacks of transgender rights and challenges to reproductive freedoms, energizing conservative cultural bases and provoking strong progressive opposition. The Women's March in 2017, among the largest demonstrations in American history, highlighted deep cultural divisions on gender issues and underscored the polarized nature of American politics regarding gender equity and inclusion (Berry & Sobieraj, 2020).

Together, these cultural tensions around immigration, race relations, and gender rights profoundly reshaped American politics, fueling deep-seated ideological divides, shaping electoral outcomes, and redefining the cultural fabric of American society.

### **3. Intensification of Political Extremism and Misinformation**

The years between 2016 and 2020 witnessed a profound intensification of political extremism and misinformation, significantly reshaping American politics and further fragmenting the cultural landscape. Fueled by polarized political rhetoric, ideological echo chambers, and increasingly influential social media platforms, this era saw a troubling expansion of extremist views across the political spectrum.

The proliferation of misinformation, facilitated by online platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, became a central concern. False narratives and conspiracy theories—exemplified by movements such as QAnon—rapidly gained traction, eroding public trust in established institutions and mainstream media. Prominent figures in the political landscape, including then-President Donald Trump and influential media personalities like Alex Jones of Infowars, played substantial roles in disseminating or



amplifying conspiracy theories and misinformation, which intensified political divisions and deepened distrust among the populace (Benkler, Faris, & Roberts, 2018).

Political extremism, manifesting as both far-right nationalism and, in some cases, far-left militancy, gained visibility during this period. Events such as the 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, highlighted the disturbing mainstream emergence of white nationalist and neo-fascist ideologies. Conversely, antifa (anti-fascist) movements gained attention through direct-action tactics and confrontations, prompting heated debates about political violence, free speech, and democratic norms (Mudde, 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly influenced both the Trump and Biden administrations, each adopting distinct strategies to address the crisis. Under President Donald Trump, the initial response in early 2020 was marked by efforts to downplay the severity of the virus, with the administration disbanding the White House pandemic response team in 2018 and eliminating the CDC epidemiologist position in China in 2019, which critics argue hindered early detection and response efforts (Doggett, 2022). As the pandemic progressed, the administration launched Operation Warp Speed to expedite vaccine development, leading to the emergency use authorization of vaccines by December 2020 (HHS, 2020). However, inconsistent messaging and reluctance to implement nationwide mitigation measures contributed to widespread public confusion and politicization of health guidelines.

Upon taking office in January 2021, President Joe Biden prioritized a comprehensive federal response to the pandemic. The administration released a National Strategy for the COVID-19 Response, aiming to expand testing, accelerate vaccine distribution, and provide economic relief (White House, 2021). Efforts included mobilizing vaccination sites nationwide and deploying federal personnel to support local health departments. Despite these initiatives, challenges such as vaccine hesitancy, the emergence of new variants, and ongoing political polarization affected the overall effectiveness of the response. By May 2023, as the public health emergency declaration ended, the administration emphasized transitioning to sustainable management of COVID-19, focusing on ensuring continued access to vaccines and treatments (White House, 2023).

The interplay between misinformation and extremism created dangerous feedback loops that undermined democratic processes, exacerbating polarization to unprecedented levels. The contentious 2020 presidential election underscored these dynamics, with rampant misinformation challenging the legitimacy of electoral outcomes and fueling polarization, ultimately culminating in the January 6, 2021, insurrection at the U.S. Capitol (Faris et al., 2020).

This intensification of extremism and misinformation revealed significant vulnerabilities within American democracy, reshaping political discourse and cultural interactions, and presenting an ongoing challenge to the cohesion and stability of American society.

## **C. 2021-2025: Democracy At A Crossroads**

### **1. Biden Administration: Attempts at Reconciliation and Pushback**

The Biden administration (2021–2025) began amidst an atmosphere of intense political polarization, social unrest, and economic uncertainty. President Joe Biden explicitly campaigned on themes of national unity, promising to address the deep divides exacerbated during preceding years, particularly under the Trump administration. Early legislative efforts, including the American Rescue Plan Act and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, were significant attempts to foster bipartisanship by stimulating economic recovery, creating jobs, and renewing American infrastructure (Levitz, 2021).

Biden's administration also sought to implement expansive climate policy initiatives, rejoining the Paris Climate Accord and promoting investment in renewable energy. However, these policies generated substantial opposition from conservatives who argued that aggressive environmental regulations could harm economic growth, job creation, and energy independence (Bomberg, 2021).

Efforts to advance social equity and racial justice were similarly contentious. While Biden emphasized racial reconciliation and equity through executive orders and policy proposals—such as promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) across federal institutions—these actions drew pushback from conservative lawmakers and commentators who criticized them as overly intrusive, costly, and divisive (Miller, 2021).

On the foreign policy front, the Biden administration maintained strong support for Ukraine following Russia's invasion, a position that garnered bipartisan backing but also faced criticism from isolationist and populist factions. These critics argued that significant financial and military resources directed abroad diverted attention from pressing domestic issues such as inflation and border security (Mead, 2022).

Overall, the Biden administration's attempts at national reconciliation achieved limited results. While substantial legislative successes demonstrated the administration's commitment to unity and progressive change, ongoing ideological resistance highlighted persistent divisions in American political and cultural life. The enduring polarization during Biden's presidency underscored the formidable challenges facing any effort to bridge America's cultural and political divides.

### **2. Trump's Return in 2024**

The 2024 U.S. presidential election marked a remarkable political resurgence for Donald Trump, who regained the presidency after a highly contested campaign against incumbent Vice President Kamala Harris. Trump's victory was characterized by decisive wins in all

seven critical battleground states, notably making him the first Republican presidential candidate since 2004 to secure a clear majority in the national popular vote (Reuters, 2025). Central to Trump's electoral success was his ability to capitalize effectively on widespread economic anxieties, particularly voter concerns over persistent inflation, stagnant wages, and increasing living costs. Approximately 58% of voters identified inflation and overall economic stability as pivotal factors influencing their decisions, demonstrating the potency of economic messaging in Trump's campaign (Reuters, 2025).

Additionally, Trump's firm stance on immigration proved critical to his success, appealing strongly to voters who prioritized border security, reduced immigration, and stricter law enforcement measures. Trump's rhetoric of national security and sovereignty resonated deeply with both his longstanding supporters and undecided swing voters, particularly those in economically vulnerable communities impacted by rapid demographic changes (Times of India, 2025). This strategic emphasis on immigration and security issues played a decisive role in securing voter confidence and delivering electoral margins in states previously considered narrowly contested or Democratic-leaning.

In the aftermath of his electoral victory, Trump's administration announced plans to implement an expansive conservative policy agenda detailed under "Project 2025," an ambitious initiative developed by conservative think tanks and organizations such as the Heritage Foundation. Project 2025 seeks to enact sweeping policy reforms across federal agencies, significantly reducing government regulations, overhauling immigration policy, strengthening border controls, and reshaping federal bureaucracies to reflect conservative values and priorities (Heritage Foundation, 2025). Central components of this plan include substantial rollbacks of environmental regulations, educational reforms aimed at limiting diversity and equity programs, and initiatives designed to expand executive authority, reshaping the administrative state to align closely with conservative ideological goals.

Critics have expressed concern that Project 2025 represents a marked shift toward authoritarian governance by consolidating executive power and reducing checks on presidential authority. Conversely, supporters view the project as a necessary corrective to perceived governmental overreach and inefficiencies, framing it as a revitalization of traditional American values of freedom, self-reliance, and limited government. Trump's return thus signifies more than a change in leadership; it signals a significant recalibration of American political and cultural life, one that is likely to further intensify ongoing ideological divisions and profoundly impact the trajectory of American democracy.

### **3. Continued Polarization and Rise of Authoritarian Tendencies**

Between 2021 and 2025, the United States experienced sustained political polarization, deepening societal divisions, and increasingly visible authoritarian tendencies within its political landscape. Despite early calls for unity by the Biden administration, ideological divides persisted, fueled by divergent perceptions of democracy, freedom, and national identity. Polarization extended beyond policy debates into fundamental disagreements about the legitimacy of democratic processes themselves, including widespread misinformation concerning electoral integrity (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2023).

This polarization coincided with the rise of authoritarian populist rhetoric, gaining momentum in national politics, media, and grassroots movements. Figures such as Donald Trump continued to exert substantial influence, perpetuating narratives around election fraud, deep state conspiracies, and anti-institutional sentiment. These authoritarian tendencies manifested through increased legislative efforts at the state level, aiming to restrict voting rights, diminish judicial independence, and curtail academic freedoms, all symptomatic of democratic erosion (Norris, 2021). The January 6 Capitol insurrection, and subsequent efforts to minimize or reinterpret the event, further illustrated the normalization of anti-democratic attitudes in segments of American politics.

Additionally, the media ecosystem became increasingly fragmented, with partisan platforms amplifying divisive narratives and undermining public trust in democratic institutions. Authoritarian populist discourses capitalized on cultural anxieties around demographic change, economic uncertainty, and identity politics, appealing to voters through simplistic narratives of national decline and calls for strong, uncompromising leadership (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2022).

By 2025, continued polarization and authoritarian dynamics posed significant challenges to American democracy. The persistence of these trends highlighted vulnerabilities within the nation's democratic framework, raising critical questions about its resilience and capacity for renewal.

In the early months of President Donald Trump's second term, Elon Musk has assumed a pivotal role within the administration, leading the newly established Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE). Tasked with streamlining federal operations, Musk has initiated aggressive measures aimed at reducing governmental expenditures and bureaucracy. One notable action includes mandating that federal employees submit weekly summaries of their accomplishments, with non-compliance potentially resulting in termination (The Wall Street Journal, 2025). While proponents argue that such initiatives enhance accountability and productivity, critics express concerns over the abrupt implementation and potential erosion of civil service protections.

Musk's involvement has also sparked legal and ethical debates, particularly regarding the extent of his authority and potential conflicts of interest. Despite the White House's clarification that Musk serves in an advisory capacity without formal decision-making power (Associated Press, 2025), his influence over significant budget cuts and restructuring efforts has led to protests and legal challenges. Detractors contend that Musk's dual role as a government adviser and CEO of major corporations with federal contracts may compromise impartial governance and blur the lines between public service and private interests. Additionally, the rapid and opaque nature of the reforms has raised alarms about the undermining of democratic processes and the marginalization of established institutional checks and balances.

#### **4. Global Comparisons: Authoritarianism in Russia, China, North Korea, and Latin America**

Between 2021 and 2025, authoritarian governance significantly intensified across multiple nations, notably Russia, China, North Korea, and several countries in Latin America. In Russia, President Vladimir Putin consolidated power extensively, particularly following the prolonged conflict with Ukraine. The invasion, initiated in 2022, resulted in significant economic hardships due to heightened military expenditure and severe Western sanctions. This economic pressure deepened authoritarian practices domestically, resulting in heightened repression, increased censorship, and the suppression of political opposition (Shevtsova, 2023).

China under President Xi Jinping similarly enhanced its authoritarian framework through aggressive centralization of political power, expansion of state surveillance systems, and suppression of internal dissent. The Chinese government advanced its global influence through strategic economic investments and alliances, promoting its governance model as an effective alternative to Western democracy. Xi's consolidation of power effectively silenced internal critiques and bolstered China's role as a central figure in an emerging global network of authoritarian regimes (Economy, 2022).

In North Korea, Kim Jong Un continued oppressive domestic policies, while increasingly aligning diplomatically and economically with China and Russia. This alignment provided essential economic support, enabling North Korea's continued pursuit of military advancements, including nuclear capabilities, despite ongoing international sanctions. Kim's leadership leveraged authoritarian partnerships to mitigate external pressures and sustain regime stability (Smith, 2023).

Across Latin America, authoritarian tendencies also gained momentum, illustrated by developments in countries such as Venezuela, Nicaragua, and El Salvador. Leaders in these nations, including Nicolás Maduro, Daniel Ortega, and Nayib Bukele, adopted measures

that curtailed political freedoms, eroded democratic institutions, and concentrated executive power, reflecting broader global trends toward autocratic governance (Levitsky & Loxton, 2023).

In Germany, the political landscape has been redefined with the election of center-right leader Friedrich Merz, who clinched the leadership by a margin of 7 percentage points. His victory, marked by securing 53% of the vote against a closely contested 46%, signals a shift towards policies steeped in fiscal discipline, free-market reforms, and cautious social conservatism. His platform embraces a modern vision that blends traditional conservative values with pragmatic strategies aimed at fostering economic growth and ensuring stability (Reuters, 2025).

Recent opinion polls indicate that public frustration with inflation, migration, and perceived threats to cultural identity provided the opening for right-wing leadership in Germany. Weidel's AfD, known for its nationalist and anti-immigration platform, has steadily risen in popularity, positioning itself as a formidable electoral force. Although mainstream parties have historically resisted alliances with the AfD, continued dissatisfaction with establishment politics and economic challenges may alter traditional coalition dynamics, making the prospect of a right-wing influence on German politics increasingly plausible (Der Spiegel, 2025).

Germany's political realignment reflects broader European trends where right-wing populism continues to challenge traditional centrist and left-wing parties, raising critical questions about the future direction of Europe's largest economy and the stability of its democratic institutions.

Across the European continent, perceptions of former US President Donald Trump have grown increasingly negative. Once regarded by some as a maverick outsider, Trump's polarizing rhetoric and unconventional policies have come under sharper criticism, with many European leaders and citizens viewing his approach as antithetical to the collaborative spirit of transatlantic relations. This evolving sentiment reflects broader concerns about the impacts of populist politics on international alliances and democratic norms. (Reuters, 2025).

## **V. Culture as a Lens for Politics**

### **A. How Cultural Values Shape Political Ideologies**

Cultural values fundamentally shape political ideologies by influencing individuals' perceptions, expectations, and attitudes toward society, governance, and collective identity. At the heart of political ideology lies culture, which encompasses deeply held beliefs, traditions, norms, and symbols that define social interactions and community

cohesion. American political ideologies are profoundly impacted by enduring cultural values such as individualism, liberty, equality, religious morality, and the pursuit of prosperity. These foundational principles have historically guided political discourse, shaping not only individual voter preferences but also policy formulation and the strategic decisions of political leaders and parties (Lipset, 1996).

American individualism, for example, strongly influences conservative political ideologies, promoting beliefs in limited government, personal responsibility, self-reliance, and free-market capitalism. This cultural value has driven significant policy shifts, such as deregulation, tax reduction, and resistance to welfare expansion, shaping conservative political platforms and mobilizing voter bases around notions of freedom and autonomy. Conversely, cultural values centered around social justice and equality significantly inform liberal political ideologies, emphasizing government's role in correcting social inequalities and protecting marginalized communities. Values such as fairness, inclusivity, and collective responsibility frequently guide progressive policy initiatives, including social welfare programs, affirmative action policies, healthcare reform, and advocacy for civil rights (Haidt, 2012).

Religion further exemplifies how cultural values can profoundly shape political ideology. The prominent role of evangelical Christianity within American conservatism illustrates how religious cultural values directly influence political engagement and policy preferences, particularly regarding issues like abortion, LGBTQ rights, education, and family structure. Religious cultural values foster cohesive political identities, enabling powerful coalitions that significantly influence election outcomes and legislative processes. Simultaneously, more secular cultural values underpin progressive movements advocating for separation of church and state, reproductive freedoms, and broader definitions of family and gender identities, often fueling intense cultural and political debates (Wuthnow, 2022).

Moreover, cultural attitudes toward immigration and national identity have increasingly defined political ideologies, reinforcing stark divisions between liberal multiculturalism and conservative nationalism. Cultural anxieties related to demographic shifts, economic uncertainty, and perceived threats to traditional social hierarchies can drive individuals toward nationalist or authoritarian ideologies. Conversely, openness to diversity, global interconnectedness, and cross-cultural understanding often correlates with more liberal or cosmopolitan political stances. These competing cultural frameworks profoundly affect public opinion and political alignments, shaping electoral outcomes, legislative agendas, and national policy strategies (Inglehart & Norris, 2017).

In summary, cultural values serve as a foundational lens through which political ideologies emerge, evolve, and solidify. Understanding this cultural underpinning is crucial for

interpreting contemporary political landscapes, highlighting why cultural narratives frequently become central battlegrounds in political struggles and ideological conflicts.

## **B. Influence of the Dominant Cultural Narratives on Political Decisions**

Dominant cultural narratives profoundly shape political decisions by defining societal norms, values, and policy priorities. Historically, dominant narratives in America have been informed by cultural ideals such as individualism, meritocracy, and the pursuit of economic prosperity. These narratives significantly influence perceptions of governance, public policy, and national identity, often setting the boundaries within which political debates occur (Lipset, 1996).

One of the central cultural narratives shaping American politics is the emphasis on individual responsibility and self-reliance. Policies emphasizing limited government intervention, deregulation, and free-market economics stem directly from these values. Political decisions concerning welfare reform, healthcare policy, and taxation often reflect this cultural preference for minimal governmental involvement, resonating deeply within the national ethos of individual freedom and autonomy (Haidt, 2012).

Another significant cultural narrative centers on the notion of meritocracy and equal opportunity. This narrative frames American society as one where success is attainable through hard work and determination. Consequently, political discussions about social programs, affirmative action, education policy, and economic redistribution frequently reflect competing interpretations of fairness and opportunity. Supporters argue such measures are necessary to correct historical and systemic inequalities, while opponents view them as undermining merit-based achievement and individual effort (Sandel, 2020).

Furthermore, dominant cultural narratives regarding national security and patriotism significantly shape political decisions on defense spending, immigration, and international relations. Political rhetoric often invokes cultural symbols and historical references—such as freedom, democracy, and national pride—to justify policy choices and mobilize public support, particularly during periods of perceived threat or instability (Inglehart & Norris, 2017).

Overall, dominant cultural narratives play a critical role in shaping political agendas, influencing legislative priorities, and framing public debates. Recognizing the impact of these narratives is essential to understanding both policy decisions and the broader dynamics of American political culture.



### **C. Cultural Identity and Its Role in Voting Behavior**

Cultural identity plays a critical role in shaping voting behavior by informing individuals' values, perceptions, and alignments with particular political movements and parties. The relationship between cultural identity and political choices is complex, influenced by shared historical experiences, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, and regional affiliations, all of which significantly affect how voters perceive candidates, policies, and political narratives (Huddy, Mason, & Aarøe, 2015).

Ethnic and racial identities, for instance, strongly influence voting patterns in American politics. Historically marginalized groups often align politically with parties and candidates advocating for civil rights, social justice, and economic equality. African American and Latino communities have consistently supported candidates and policies promoting social equity, immigration reform, and anti-discrimination measures, reflecting deeply embedded cultural experiences of marginalization and social advocacy (Tesler & Sears, 2010). On the other hand, voters whose identities align with majority cultural groups may prioritize policies emphasizing tradition, stability, and preservation of perceived cultural norms, influencing their electoral choices accordingly.

In the 2024 presidential contest, distinct voting patterns emerged among key demographic groups. Exit polls indicated that Hispanic voters largely supported Vice President Kamala Harris over Donald Trump, with approximately 62% of Latino voters choosing Harris compared to 37% for Trump (Hispanic Federation, 2024; Reuters, 2024). This strong preference among Hispanic voters appears to be driven in part by economic and immigration concerns—many within this community favor policies that promote economic opportunity and humane treatment over the harsh rhetoric often associated with Trump's approach. Similarly, African-American voters remained one of the Democratic Party's most steadfast constituencies; exit data show that roughly 86% of Black voters cast their ballots for Harris, while Trump received only about 12–13% of the Black vote (Reuters, 2024). These trends underscore the enduring loyalty of minority groups to the Democratic platform, despite modest attempts by the Republican campaign to attract these voters.

Gender differences also played a significant role in shaping the outcome of the election. Nationwide exit polls revealed a pronounced gender gap: approximately 55% of male voters supported Trump, whereas only around 43% backed Harris. In contrast, female voters tended to favor Harris, with about 53% casting their votes for her compared to roughly 45% for Trump (CNN, 2024). This divergence reflects longstanding patterns in which men are more likely to respond to messages emphasizing economic nationalism, law and order, and a strong, assertive leadership style, while women generally prioritize issues such as reproductive rights, healthcare, and social equality. Together, these demographic dynamics

played a crucial role in the electoral outcome, highlighting how enduring social cleavages continue to influence voter behavior in pivotal ways.

Religious cultural identities also significantly shape voting behavior. For example, Evangelical Christians and conservative religious communities often prioritize moral issues such as abortion, family structure, and religious freedoms, aligning with candidates and political parties that reflect these concerns. Meanwhile, more secular or religiously liberal groups may support policies emphasizing individual rights, separation of church and state, and progressive social values (Wuthnow, 2022). These religiously informed cultural identities provide powerful mobilization frameworks, driving voter turnout and political activism.

Exit polls and survey data from the 2024 presidential election indicate that the evangelical Christian and conservative Christian voter base remained a reliably strong constituency for Donald Trump. In several key battleground states—and nationally—exit poll data showed that a vast majority of white evangelical or born-again Christians voted for Trump, often with support figures in the mid-80s percentage range, while support for Kamala Harris among this group was typically in the low double digits (e.g., around 13%). This overwhelming preference is driven by several factors. Evangelical and conservative Christian voters tend to favor policies that promote traditional social values. They appreciate Trump’s stances on issues such as abortion, religious freedom, and his promise to appoint conservative judges who interpret the Constitution in a manner consistent with their values. Furthermore, Trump’s rhetoric on law and order and his criticism of policies that they perceive as undermining religious liberty resonated strongly with this electorate. As a result, the evangelical and conservative Christian community continued to be one of the Republican Party’s most steadfast and influential voting blocs in 2024 (CNN, 2024; Reuters, 2024).

Additionally, regional cultural identities contribute to distinct political affiliations and voting behaviors across the United States. The cultural distinctions between urban, suburban, and rural communities often correspond to pronounced differences in voting patterns, reflecting divergent attitudes toward issues like gun control, environmental policy, immigration, and economic regulation. Rural communities typically support candidates emphasizing conservative cultural values, individual liberties, and limited governmental interference, while urban voters generally lean toward candidates promoting progressive social policies, multiculturalism, and expanded governmental roles in social welfare (Cramer, 2016).

Exit poll data from several states in the 2024 presidential election indicate a clear urban–rural divide in voting behavior. In general, rural areas tended to favor Donald Trump by a wide margin, while urban centers leaned strongly toward Kamala Harris.

For example, in Texas, exit polls reported that rural voters gave Trump around 72% of the vote compared to only 25% for Harris, whereas urban areas saw a much closer contest—with urban voters favoring Harris by a slight margin (Trump received about 46% and Harris 52%) (CNN, 2024a). Similarly, in Pennsylvania—a critical Rust Belt swing state—urban areas such as Philadelphia’s core reported very high support for Harris (with figures as high as 69% in urban areas), while rural parts of the state largely backed Trump, who garnered approximately 67% in those areas (CNN, 2024b).

These differences can be attributed to a number of factors. Rural voters have historically leaned Republican, valuing Trump’s emphasis on economic nationalism, law and order, and traditional social values. Urban voters, on the other hand, tend to prioritize issues such as social justice, environmental policies, and progressive approaches to healthcare and education, which align more closely with Harris’s campaign messaging. In addition, the demographic and economic characteristics of urban areas—often more diverse and with higher educational attainment—contribute to their preference for Democratic candidates.

In summary, cultural identity significantly impacts voter preferences, shaping electoral outcomes and political landscapes. Understanding these cultural dynamics offers crucial insights into voting patterns and the broader currents of American political life.

## **VI. Politics as a Lens for Culture**

### **A. How Political Ideologies Reinforce Cultural Norms**

Political ideologies significantly influence and reinforce cultural norms by embedding specific values, behaviors, and beliefs within public policy, institutional practices, and civic discourse. Through legislation, education policies, media narratives, and governmental rhetoric, political ideologies actively shape cultural expectations and standards, effectively guiding societal understandings of what constitutes appropriate or desirable behavior (Lakoff, 2014).

Conservative political ideologies, for instance, often emphasize traditional cultural norms related to family structure, religious adherence, individual responsibility, and patriotism. Policies rooted in conservatism frequently reinforce these norms by supporting measures that protect traditional family values, uphold religious liberties, and maintain historical narratives emphasizing national pride and heritage. Educational curricula shaped by conservative political influence tend to stress traditional interpretations of history and morality, thereby strengthening culturally conservative worldviews within society (Hunter, 1991).

Progressive political ideologies, on the other hand, typically seek to challenge and redefine existing cultural norms to promote diversity, equity, and social justice. Progressive policies,

such as those advocating gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights, multicultural education, and environmental stewardship, actively shape and reinforce norms emphasizing inclusivity, diversity, and collective responsibility. The implementation of progressive policies in education and media representation often seeks to normalize historically marginalized identities and perspectives, shifting cultural perceptions toward greater acceptance and openness (Grossmann & Hopkins, 2016).

The interplay between political ideologies and cultural norms also extends to issues of national identity and immigration. Nationalist political ideologies promote cultural norms emphasizing uniformity, assimilation, and the preservation of national heritage. Policies reflecting these ideologies—such as strict immigration enforcement, language requirements, and patriotic education—reinforce cultural norms centered around national cohesion and shared identity. In contrast, cosmopolitan political ideologies encourage cultural pluralism, open borders, and global interconnectedness, reinforcing norms that value multicultural exchange and global cooperation (Appiah, 2019).

In essence, political ideologies do not merely reflect existing cultural norms but actively participate in their reinforcement and transformation. Understanding this dynamic is essential to grasping the reciprocal relationship between politics and culture, highlighting how political decisions significantly shape cultural landscapes and societal values.

## **B. Political Policies as Expressions of Cultural Values**

Political policies often serve as explicit expressions of underlying cultural values, embodying the collective ideals, beliefs, and priorities held by society. Policy decisions reflect cultural commitments, indicating what communities value, prioritize, and seek to preserve or transform. In doing so, policies not only address specific issues or practical needs but also communicate deeper societal meanings about identity, morality, justice, and collective responsibility (Inglehart & Welzel, 2010).

For example, social welfare policies typically reveal cultural beliefs concerning compassion, fairness, and collective responsibility. Societies that culturally value solidarity, empathy, and equality often advocate for robust social safety nets, universal healthcare, and policies designed to reduce economic disparities. These policies reflect a cultural commitment to ensuring dignity, fairness, and protection for vulnerable populations, signifying collective responsibility as a core societal value (Esping-Andersen, 1990). Conversely, societies prioritizing individual autonomy and self-reliance tend to favor policies that emphasize limited government intervention, personal responsibility, and economic freedom, reflecting cultural ideals of individualism and meritocracy.

Environmental policies similarly illustrate how cultural values influence political decisions. Communities that highly value sustainability, stewardship, and ecological responsibility

enact rigorous environmental regulations, renewable energy incentives, and conservation efforts. Such policies reflect cultural beliefs in preserving natural resources, respecting ecological balance, and ensuring long-term wellbeing for future generations. In contrast, cultures emphasizing economic growth, technological progress, and resource exploitation may adopt policies prioritizing deregulation, resource extraction, and industry support, interpreting nature to economic advancement rather than an end worthy of protection (Dryzek, 2013).

Immigration policies also vividly express cultural values related to national identity, diversity, and inclusion. Open and welcoming immigration policies reflect cultural commitments to multiculturalism, diversity, and global interconnectedness, reinforcing ideals of openness, acceptance, and cross-cultural exchange. Restrictive immigration policies, on the other hand, communicate cultural values of national cohesion, cultural homogeneity, and security, emphasizing the preservation of established social and cultural identities against perceived external threats (Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2014).

In essence, political policies serve as tangible manifestations of a society's deeper cultural values, embodying beliefs and priorities that shape collective behavior and identity. By understanding this relationship, Americans gain critical insights into how political decisions function as cultural expressions, reinforcing and communicating societal values across generations.

### **C. The Media's Role in Mediating Political and Cultural Narratives**

The media occupies a pivotal role in shaping and mediating the interplay between political ideologies and cultural narratives. As a primary source of information, interpretation, and dissemination, the media profoundly influences how political issues are understood, debated, and resolved within society. Through the selective framing of events, issues, and narratives, media platforms actively construct and reinforce particular cultural meanings, effectively shaping public perceptions of politics, policy, and societal values (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

In contemporary American society, traditional and new media platforms have significantly impacted political polarization by frequently catering to specific ideological and cultural audiences. Cable news networks such as Fox News, CNN, and MSNBC exemplify this phenomenon, selectively framing political issues in alignment with their viewers' ideological orientations. This selective presentation reinforces existing cultural biases, intensifies partisan divisions, and deepens the polarization of political discourse. Such mediated narratives not only reflect existing cultural divides but actively reinforce and amplify them, shaping political identities and ideological commitments among the audience (Berry & Sobieraj, 2020).

Social media platforms further complicate the media landscape by enabling rapid dissemination and amplification of both accurate information and misinformation. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube utilize algorithms that personalize content delivery based on user preferences and behaviors, creating echo chambers that reinforce cultural and political perspectives. These online environments often solidify users' ideological positions, intensifying cultural divides and contributing to the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories. Consequently, social media's role in mediating political narratives significantly impacts democratic processes by shaping voter perceptions, behaviors, and electoral outcomes (Benkler, Faris, & Roberts, 2018).

Beyond polarization, media also plays a critical role in shaping cultural perceptions around issues of race, gender, immigration, and national identity. Representation in media—whether inclusive or exclusionary—can profoundly influence public attitudes, cultural acceptance, and policy preferences. Progressive media narratives highlighting diversity, social justice, and inclusivity often shift cultural norms toward greater acceptance of marginalized groups. Conversely, media narratives emphasizing threats to cultural cohesion or national security frequently reinforce exclusionary attitudes and restrictive policy preferences, illustrating media's powerful capacity to shape cultural dynamics and political outcomes (Entman & Rojecki, 2000).

In sum, the media's role as a mediator of political and cultural narratives is instrumental in defining societal values, shaping public discourse, and influencing political decisions. Recognizing this role is crucial to understanding the complex dynamics between culture, politics, and societal change in contemporary America.

## **VII. Addressing Extremism and Political Polarization**

### **A. The Roots of Extremism in Cultural Anxieties and Identities**

These words from a 2021 Pew Research Center study ring so true: “Partisan polarization remains the dominant, seemingly unalterable condition of American politics. Republicans and Democrats agree on very little – and when they do, it often is in the shared belief that they have little in common” (Pew Research Center, 2021).

Political extremism and polarization have deep roots in cultural anxieties and identities, emerging significantly from tensions related to rapid societal changes, perceived threats to established values, and shifting demographics. Cultural anxieties, often triggered by economic uncertainty, globalization, immigration, and changing social norms, play a pivotal role in fueling extremist ideologies by generating feelings of insecurity, disenfranchisement, and loss of social status among certain populations. As societies experience demographic shifts and cultural transformations, segments of the population can perceive these developments as existential threats to their traditional identities and social positions,

motivating them to embrace extremist political ideologies that promise restoration, protection, or affirmation of their cultural heritage and group identities (Hochschild, 2016).

For example, nationalist and far-right extremist movements frequently gain momentum by capitalizing on fears about immigration and demographic change. Such groups typically frame cultural diversity as a threat to national cohesion and traditional values, positioning themselves as defenders of a "pure" national identity against perceived cultural dilution. The rise of nationalist populism in recent decades, exemplified by movements across the United States and Europe, highlights how cultural anxieties concerning globalization and immigration can galvanize support for exclusionary policies and authoritarian leadership (Inglehart & Norris, 2017).

Similarly, cultural anxieties surrounding economic insecurity and technological disruption contribute significantly to political extremism. Rapid economic transformations caused by globalization and technological advancements can lead to displacement and uncertainty, prompting affected individuals and communities to seek reassurance and stability from extremist political narratives. Populist movements frequently exploit these anxieties by offering simple explanations for complex problems, blaming external groups or elites for societal difficulties, thereby reinforcing exclusionary identities and radicalizing political discourse (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2022).

Cultural identities, particularly when tied to religious or ethnic affiliations, can also serve as powerful mobilizing forces for political extremism. Groups whose identities feel threatened or marginalized often gravitate toward political extremes as a means of asserting their collective existence and dignity. These identity-driven movements can become particularly resistant to compromise, as political ideologies are closely intertwined with core cultural and personal identities. In such scenarios, politics transcends mere policy debates, evolving into existential battles over identity, heritage, and collective survival (Fukuyama, 2018).

Addressing the roots of extremism thus requires recognizing and alleviating the cultural anxieties and identity insecurities that underpin radicalization. Effective strategies involve fostering inclusive societal narratives, strengthening community resilience, and promoting economic policies that reduce uncertainty and inequality. Acknowledging and constructively engaging with cultural identities and anxieties is essential for mitigating polarization and preventing extremist ideologies from taking deeper roots within society.

## **B. Strategies for Promoting Cultural Dialogue and Political Reconciliation**

Promoting cultural dialogue and achieving political reconciliation in a polarized society requires deliberate strategies aimed at fostering understanding, trust, and mutual respect among diverse communities. Central to these strategies is the cultivation of inclusive

environments where open and honest conversations about cultural differences and political disagreements can occur without fear of judgment, marginalization, or retribution. Creating safe spaces for dialogue, whether through community forums, educational institutions, or facilitated public events, encourages individuals from diverse cultural and ideological backgrounds to interact directly, thus breaking down stereotypes and building mutual understanding (Gastil & Levine, 2005).

Education plays a crucial role in promoting cultural dialogue and reducing polarization. Curricula that emphasize critical thinking, empathy, historical awareness, and cross-cultural understanding can equip individuals with the skills and perspectives necessary for constructive dialogue and civic engagement. Educational programs that include diverse historical perspectives and promote understanding of different cultural and political experiences help students develop the ability to navigate complex societal issues and resist extremist narratives (Banks, 2015). Similarly, media literacy education enables individuals to critically analyze information, differentiate factual reporting from misinformation, and understand diverse viewpoints, thereby reducing susceptibility to polarization and misinformation.

Another essential strategy involves leveraging media and digital platforms to facilitate positive, inclusive cultural exchanges rather than exacerbate divisions. Social media companies and digital platforms can play a pivotal role in reducing polarization by adjusting algorithms to limit misinformation and minimize the spread of inflammatory or polarizing content. Promoting narratives that highlight commonalities and shared goals, rather than accentuating differences, can help to counteract extremist messaging and foster greater social cohesion. Media outlets, influencers, and civic leaders can model constructive dialogue by demonstrating respectful exchanges of differing opinions and emphasizing common civic values and goals (Iyengar & Massey, 2019).

Political reconciliation also requires structural reforms aimed at reducing institutional incentives for polarization. For instance, reforms such as ranked-choice voting, independent redistricting commissions, and campaign finance transparency can help create political systems less driven by ideological extremes, incentivizing politicians and political parties to seek common ground and moderate their rhetoric. Additionally, bipartisan or nonpartisan initiatives aimed at fostering cross-party dialogue, cooperation on policy matters, and joint community projects can strengthen trust and cooperation between opposing political factions (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018).

Ultimately, strategies for promoting cultural dialogue and political reconciliation must be multifaceted and sustained, addressing both individual attitudes and institutional practices. By intentionally fostering environments where respectful exchanges can occur, educating citizens in cultural competency and critical engagement, and pursuing political



and structural reforms, societies can begin to overcome polarization, heal cultural divides, and build more resilient, inclusive democratic communities.

### **C. Importance of Civic Education and Shared Civic Identity**

Civic education plays a fundamental role in mitigating extremism and political polarization by fostering a sense of shared civic identity and equipping individuals with the skills necessary for active and constructive democratic engagement. At its core, civic education emphasizes the principles of democracy, critical thinking, active citizenship, and mutual respect, empowering individuals to navigate complex social and political environments. By cultivating a deeper understanding of democratic institutions, individual rights and responsibilities, and the importance of civic participation, educational initiatives strengthen democratic resilience and counteract divisive political ideologies (Galston, 2004).

One crucial aspect of effective civic education is promoting a shared civic identity—a collective sense of belonging to a broader national community grounded in democratic values such as equality, liberty, justice, and respect for diversity. Encouraging a common civic identity helps transcend divisive cultural or ideological boundaries by emphasizing shared commitments and mutual interests. Through inclusive educational approaches that highlight collective historical experiences, civic achievements, and the interconnectedness of diverse communities, civic education fosters cohesion and social trust, reducing susceptibility to extremist narratives that thrive on division and isolation (Putnam, 2020).

Moreover, civic education actively counters polarization by equipping individuals with essential dialogue and deliberation skills. By teaching students and citizens how to engage constructively with diverse perspectives, critically evaluate information sources, and negotiate differences respectfully, civic education fosters an informed and tolerant electorate capable of navigating political conflicts productively. Programs that include simulations of democratic processes, debates, community service projects, and structured deliberative forums are particularly effective in translating theoretical democratic values into practical civic skills (Gastil & Levine, 2005).

The revitalization of civic education also addresses the challenge posed by misinformation and declining trust in democratic institutions. As citizens become more proficient in discerning credible information, understanding institutional functions, and recognizing the importance of democratic norms, they are better equipped to resist conspiracy theories, authoritarian rhetoric, and polarization. Educational institutions, government agencies, community organizations, and media outlets all have crucial roles in supporting comprehensive civic education initiatives that reinforce democratic literacy and shared civic values (Levinson, 2012).

Ultimately, the emphasis on civic education and the development of a shared civic identity represents a critical strategy for addressing the root causes of polarization and extremism. By cultivating informed, engaged, and responsible citizens who recognize their collective stake in democratic health, societies can build stronger, more cohesive, and resilient democratic frameworks, capable of bridging cultural divides and fostering political reconciliation.

## **VIII. Future Scenarios for America**

### **A. Overview**

Americans have struggled mightily to resolve their fundamental differences. While there have been exceptions, the reality of failure to resolve differences has tracked throughout the nation's history. The very issues underlying the origins of the U.S. Constitution and those underlying the Civil War remain very much at play in American culture and politics. For the most part, we have resolved ourselves to our differences and agreed to coexist. America today has an almost evenly divided society, with some falling into the middle.

Recent research on future political scenarios in the United States highlights several emerging themes, including increasing polarization, institutional challenges, demographic shifts, and the potential for technological and economic disruptions to reshape governance.

For example, Pew Research Center (2022) has published reports that forecast how deepening partisan polarization and declining public trust in institutions may lead to more gridlocked government and a reconfigured party system if current trends continue. Their work indicates that changes in media consumption and shifting demographic profiles will also play a role in determining future political alignments.

Similarly, the Brookings Institution (2021) has examined how long-term demographic changes—such as the increasing racial and ethnic diversity of the electorate—and economic inequality might influence future policy debates and electoral outcomes. Their research suggests that these structural changes could force political parties to reexamine their platforms and coalition-building strategies.

In addition, scenario planning research conducted by the RAND Corporation (2020) explores a range of possible future scenarios, including the risks of democratic erosion amid rising populism and the challenges posed by rapid technological change. This research uses model-based projections to assess how factors like misinformation and declining civic engagement might undermine democratic norms.

More recently, a report by the National Academy of Sciences (2023) has addressed the future of American democracy by highlighting the dual challenges of internal fragmentation

(e.g., through polarization and misinformation) and external pressures in a globalized world. The report stresses that while there are significant risks, there are also opportunities for reform through renewed civic engagement and institutional innovation.

Collectively, these studies paint a picture of a future political landscape that is both uncertain and dynamic, with multiple potential trajectories depending on how current challenges are addressed.

Varying opinions have been offered on how we do or do not resolve our differences. Let's look at a few.

### **Conservative Perspectives**

Conservative scholar Lawrence M. Mead argues that America's core challenges stem not from racism but profound cultural differences between its European-descended majority and minority groups primarily from non-Western origins. He contends that America's individualist culture—characterized by internalized self-control, future orientation, and moralistic civic responsibility—differs sharply from the non-Western cultural norms exhibited by many minority groups, who Mead describes as generally more passive, externally governed, and less inclined toward personal initiative. According to Mead, these cultural differences, rather than racial discrimination, drive persistent socioeconomic disparities, ineffective anti-poverty measures, and tensions over immigration, assimilation, and civic trust. Mead suggests that continued high levels of immigration from culturally distant, non-Western societies threaten America's ability to sustain a dynamic civic culture and effective democratic governance.

Mead further argues that failing to acknowledge cultural differences leads American politics toward polarization, moral inequality, and increasingly radical social demands, exemplified by movements like anti-racism. He claims the expectation that all cultural groups seamlessly adapt to America's individualist norms is unrealistic and has led to misguided policies such as affirmative action and ineffective welfare programs. Instead, Mead advocates for acknowledging cultural distinctions openly, proposing that assimilation into individualist norms is both necessary and challenging, taking generations to accomplish. Ultimately, he challenges the notion of America as a universal nation open to all, asserting that it can effectively integrate only those willing and able to adopt its distinctly Western individualist cultural values.

Another conservative perspective, articulated by Samuel Huntington, emphasizes the importance of shared national identity, cultural assimilation, and common civic principles as essential for resolving differences within society. Huntington argues that a strong, cohesive national culture anchored in shared language, history, and civic values is crucial for maintaining social harmony and political stability. From this viewpoint, societal

fragmentation arises when groups within a country prioritize distinct identities or values over national cohesion, weakening collective civic commitment and generating social tensions. Huntington advocates for policies that encourage assimilation and reinforce a unified national identity, suggesting that clearly articulated expectations of cultural integration can help resolve societal divides and preserve democratic institutions (Huntington, 2004).

Similarly, conservative scholar Thomas Sowell emphasizes the critical role culture plays in shaping political and economic outcomes. Sowell argues that cultural values and behaviors significantly influence socioeconomic success and failure across various groups, independent of systemic discrimination. He suggests that policies emphasizing personal responsibility, strong work ethics, and family stability—core cultural elements—are essential for improving societal cohesion and reducing poverty. Sowell contends that disregarding cultural factors in favor of purely structural explanations for disparities can lead to ineffective policies and perpetuate rather than alleviate social problems (Sowell, 2015).

### **Progressive Perspectives**

On the other hand, a scholarly perspective emphasizing the role of systemic racism in perpetuating divisions in America is presented by Cameron McCarthy in "Rethinking Liberal and Radical Perspectives on Racial Inequality in Schooling: Making the Case for Nonsynchrony." McCarthy critiques both mainstream and neo-Marxist explanations of racial inequality in educational settings, arguing that these frameworks often overlook the complex interplay of race, gender, and class within economic, political, and social contexts. He introduces a nonsynchronous theory of schooling, which posits that racial disparities are deeply embedded in the structural and institutional fabric of society, leading to persistent inequalities in educational outcomes. This perspective challenges the notion that cultural differences are the primary drivers of inequality, instead highlighting systemic racism as a fundamental cause (McCarthy, 2023).

Further supporting this view, a study published in *Cognitive Research: Principles and Implications* examines how systemic racism is ingrained in American society. The research outlines how historical practices and policies have reinforced disadvantages for Black Americans across various life domains, including housing, education, wealth accumulation, health, and legal treatment. These institutional and societal systems perpetuate individual biases and racially discriminatory interactions, resulting in systemic racism that continues to undermine life opportunities and outcomes based on racial categories (Roberts and Rizzo, 2021).

The greatest concern to many Americans is the threat of an authoritarian regime led by Donald Trump and similar minded Republicans. Let's look at this issue, since it is most threatening to democracy.

In the aftermath of the 2021 Capitol insurrection and as the controversial Project 2025 initiative, the PRRI (Public Religion Research Institute) undertook a comprehensive survey revealing that a significant minority of Americans hold authoritarian views closely tied to partisanship, religion, and Christian nationalism. Employing two traditional measures—the Right-Wing Authoritarianism Scale (RWAS) and the Child-Rearing Authoritarianism Scale (CRAS)—the study finds that roughly four in ten Americans embrace authoritarianism, with notably stronger adherence among Republicans, particularly those supportive of Donald Trump, white evangelical Protestants, weekly churchgoers, and adherents or sympathizers of Christian nationalism (PRRI, 2024).

Two-thirds of Republicans and white evangelical Protestants score high on authoritarian scales, marking a distinct partisan and religious alignment. Alarming, individuals endorsing authoritarian beliefs, along with Christian nationalists, are roughly twice as likely as the general population to support political violence and endorse the necessity of a leader willing to break rules to "set things right." The survey also links authoritarianism and Christian nationalism to the acceptance of apocalyptic beliefs, dominionist theology, and harshly anti-immigrant views, including rhetoric around immigrant invasions and advocating for extreme measures such as militarized detention camps. These findings underscore profound threats to democratic stability as authoritarian attitudes intertwine closely with religious identity, political allegiance, and deep-seated societal fears, posing critical implications for the future of democracy in America.

A 2024 global Pew Research Center study indicates that while representative democracy remains broadly favored globally, a substantial minority of citizens across various countries express openness to authoritarian governance, including rule by a strong leader or the military. Support for authoritarian systems is notably higher in middle-income countries, particularly in India, Indonesia, and Mexico, and generally stronger among those on the ideological right, supporters of right-wing populist parties, and individuals with lower incomes. Additionally, younger adults in certain countries, such as the U.S., India, and Australia, are more inclined toward authoritarianism, whereas older adults exhibit higher authoritarian tendencies in Greece, Japan, and South Korea. The survey also found a clear inverse relationship between support for authoritarianism and commitment to democratic values like political opposition freedoms, free speech, judicial fairness, and human rights (Silver and Fetterolf, 2024).

When asked about improving their democracies, few respondents explicitly recommended replacing their current democratic systems entirely. However, among those who did,

proposed alternatives varied widely, including military rule, expert governance, autocracy, theocracy, anarchy, and revolution. Authoritarian supporters were less likely than nonsupporters to offer concrete solutions, though they frequently cited economic concerns and leadership dissatisfaction as primary issues. In countries such as Brazil and Kenya, authoritarian supporters disproportionately favored drastic leadership changes, while in Israel, it was the democracy supporters who more frequently called for replacing current leaders.

As we proceed in identifying possible future scenarios for American politics, three research-supported observations stand out.

1. Individuals who share closely aligned cultural and political values typically find it easier to collaborate and manage their differences effectively (Haidt, 2012).
2. Individuals whose cultural and political values significantly diverge face greater challenges in collaborating and bridging their differences, though not impossibly so (Putnam, 2007).
3. People with similar personality traits, educational backgrounds, and sociodemographic characteristics often experience fewer barriers in collaboration and conflict resolution due to enhanced mutual understanding (Forsyth, 2018).

Collaboration and conflict resolution depend significantly on the commonality or divergence of individuals' values, beliefs, and identities. Research consistently indicates that shared values, cultural norms, and political beliefs facilitate more effective communication, trust-building, and cooperation among individuals or groups. For instance, people with aligned political ideologies are more likely to empathize with one another's perspectives, enabling smoother dialogue and cooperative problem-solving (Pew Research Center, 2021). Shared cultural frameworks and ideological foundations also minimize misunderstandings, allowing individuals to more easily agree upon fundamental assumptions, thus streamlining reconciliation processes (Haidt, 2012).

However, substantial cultural and political differences do not categorically prevent successful collaboration or resolution of disagreements. Indeed, diversity in values can provide alternative perspectives and drive innovative solutions if managed thoughtfully. Effective collaboration across such divides often hinges on intentional communication, empathy, structured dialogue, and the willingness of parties to acknowledge legitimacy in differing viewpoints. According to Putnam (2007), while diversity might initially increase social tension and reduce interpersonal trust, deliberate efforts toward inclusive engagement, trust-building, and community interaction can mitigate these issues and even promote greater social cohesion over time.

Similarly, alignment in personality traits, education levels, and other sociodemographic factors often reduces the friction commonly associated with interpersonal interactions, enabling smoother communication and quicker consensus-building. Psychological research on group dynamics confirms that homogeneity in traits such as educational background and cognitive style can streamline group processes and consensus formation (Forsyth, 2018). Yet, it's also essential to acknowledge that homogeneity may limit creative problem-solving and reinforce biases, underscoring the importance of intentionally fostering diverse but effectively managed groups to harness the strengths of both similarities and differences (Page, 2017).

### **Initial Reactions by the American Public to Trump's Orders for Sweeping Change**

Recent reactions to Trump's sweeping executive orders reflect deep political and cultural divides across the American electorate. Among Republicans, many view these orders as a bold reassertion of conservative principles and a necessary corrective to what they see as bureaucratic overreach. Supporters in this camp argue that the measures restore a sense of national sovereignty and traditional values, despite some younger Republicans expressing concern about the potential erosion of established institutional norms (Politico, 2025). In contrast, Democrats are highly critical, contending that the orders bypass Congress, undermine democratic checks and balances, and threaten civil liberties. This opposition is echoed by many African-American and Hispanic voters who fear that the orders may exacerbate existing inequalities—African-American voters point to the erosion of protections against systemic discrimination, while Hispanic voters are unsettled by policies perceived as targeting immigrant communities (Reuters, 2025).

When broken down by race and age, white voters remain divided: older white voters tend to support Trump's actions as a reaffirmation of traditional governance, whereas younger white voters are generally more skeptical of the concentration of executive power. Gender differences also emerge, with male voters—particularly those in middle and older age groups—more inclined to endorse the orders due to an appreciation for decisiveness and law-and-order rhetoric, while female voters, across all age groups, are more likely to oppose them because of concerns over civil rights and social welfare (Gallup, 2025). Religious communities show a similarly polarized response. Evangelical and conservative Christians overwhelmingly back the orders, valuing measures that they believe protect religious freedom and uphold traditional moral standards, even though critics argue that such support can sometimes be driven by ideological fervor rather than rational policy analysis (Pew Research Center, 2025). Meanwhile, more liberal religious groups and religious minorities denounce the orders, arguing that they represent an overreach of executive power that undermines the nation's pluralistic values (The New York Times, 2025).

In essence, those who support Trump’s executive orders—largely Republicans and conservative religious communities—believe they are essential to rein in federal overreach and restore traditional societal norms, even if this stance may appear irrational given the orders’ potential to destabilize democratic processes. On the other hand, opponents, including Democrats, minority voters, younger white voters, and liberal religious groups, justify their dissent by emphasizing the importance of legislative oversight, protection of civil liberties, and the dangers inherent in concentrating power in the executive branch (Politico, 2025; Reuters, 2025).

Elon Musk’s involvement with the Trump administration has sparked a wide-ranging debate about the growing influence of high-profile tech entrepreneurs in public policy. Supporters of Musk argue that his pragmatic approach and innovative vision provide valuable insights into technological and economic strategies that can benefit national competitiveness. Many conservatives praise his willingness to engage directly with the government and see his role as a bridge between Silicon Valley and policymaking—a move that reflects a modern, business-oriented approach to governance (The Wall Street Journal, 2025). However, critics express concern that his close ties to the administration blur the boundaries between corporate interests and public accountability, potentially skewing policy in favor of a select few rather than the broader public (Reuters, 2025).

In addition to his administrative role, Musk’s public actions have further polarized opinion. His often controversial and impulsive social media posts, coupled with high-stakes business decisions, have been both lauded as bold and condemned as reckless. Proponents argue that his outspoken nature champions free speech and disrupts the status quo in a refreshing way, while detractors contend that such behavior undermines institutional stability and erodes trust in both government and corporate leadership (Politico, 2025). This polarization reflects a broader debate about the ethical implications of celebrity influence in politics, raising critical questions about accountability, transparency, and the appropriate role of private enterprise in shaping public policy (The New York Times, 2025).

In light of all of this, what are the dominant scenarios for America’s political future? Three emerge from the analysis in this paper.

## **B. Three Scenarios for Discussion**

The three future political scenarios—reconciliation, entrenchment, and authoritarianism—were developed through an analysis of current political trends, historical precedents, and socio-cultural dynamics. By examining factors such as polarization, demographic changes, immigration patterns, and civic engagement levels, these scenarios were constructed to represent plausible paths forward for American society. They provide a structured



framework to assess potential outcomes and guide strategic decision-making in addressing societal divisions.

For now, the scenarios are discussed in the context of national politics. More informed insights could be gained by examining where these scenarios are most likely to take shape in communities, substate regions or metropolitan areas, and states. This is a major research job beyond the scope of this working paper. For example, what is the most likely future political scenario for the Greater Cleveland area, the Dallas metroplex, or in rural counties like Chattooga County, Georgia and Modoc County, California?

### **1. Reconciliation Scenario**

In the Reconciliation Scenario, America undertakes a comprehensive and deliberate approach to resolving deep-rooted cultural and political divisions through sustained dialogue, education reform, and inclusive policy-making. Stakeholders from diverse sectors—community leaders, religious groups, educational institutions, policymakers, civic organizations, and media entities—actively engage in structured dialogues designed to bridge ideological and cultural divides. Civic education programs are revitalized across schools and universities, prioritizing curricula focused on critical thinking, empathy, historical understanding, and democratic citizenship. Wealthy power holders and philanthropic foundations contribute significant resources to fund nationwide civic initiatives, independent and balanced media, and public forums to enhance citizen participation.

Electoral reforms such as ranked-choice voting, independent redistricting commissions, and campaign finance reform gain bipartisan support, substantially diminishing political incentives for polarization. Major socioeconomic issues—including economic inequality, healthcare access, housing affordability, and demographic shifts such as increased racial and ethnic diversity—are systematically addressed through targeted policies emphasizing equity, social inclusion, and economic opportunity. Public institutions invest in robust workforce retraining programs, affordable higher education, and accessible healthcare to reduce structural disparities. Wealthy power holders recognize the societal benefits of stability and contribute constructively by aligning their interests with broader social well-being rather than short-term gains. Under these comprehensive measures, public trust in democratic processes and institutions gradually rebuilds, fostering a stable and inclusive democratic culture. The probability of this optimistic scenario occurring, though challenging, is estimated most optimistically at approximately 20%. In other words, our chances of this taking place are 1 in 5.

## **2. Entrenchment Scenario**

The Entrenchment Scenario envisions a future where America's political and cultural divisions persist, becoming increasingly resistant to reconciliation. Polarization remains deeply embedded through ideological echo chambers sustained by partisan media channels and amplified by algorithm-driven social media platforms. Public discourse is marked by persistent confrontation and mistrust, characterized by misinformation, conspiracy theories, and heightened emotional engagement rather than rational debate. Wealthy power holders and established interest groups reinforce these divides by funneling significant financial resources into political campaigns, media outlets, and lobbying efforts designed to preserve the status quo and protect vested economic interests.

Socioeconomic and demographic factors, including persistent income inequality, uneven economic development, and segregation along racial and ethnic lines, further entrench existing divisions. Rural and urban communities experience starkly divergent economic and social realities, exacerbating mutual misunderstanding and political hostility. Legislative gridlock becomes commonplace, impeding governmental response to critical national issues such as infrastructure renewal, economic reform, climate change, and public health crises. Disillusionment among citizens grows, with increasing civic disengagement and voter apathy, further weakening democratic legitimacy. Given current structural incentives and the existing political climate, this scenario is highly plausible, with an estimated probability of around 40%. Our chances of this scenario playing out are 4 in 10.

## **3. Authoritarian Scenario**

In the Authoritarian Scenario, political leaders and influential elites exploit deep-seated cultural anxieties, fears related to demographic change, economic uncertainty, and national identity concerns to justify the erosion of democratic norms and consolidate centralized power. Leaders use populist rhetoric emphasizing existential threats from immigration, crime, economic instability, or loss of traditional values, gaining public support for more authoritative governance structures. Wealthy elites and influential power holders actively shape media narratives, funding platforms that support authoritarian-leaning politicians who promise stability and order at the expense of democratic freedoms and transparency.

Socioeconomic and demographic changes, such as widening wealth gaps, stagnating social mobility, and increasing racial and ethnic diversity, are framed as threats rather than opportunities, fueling exclusionary and discriminatory policies. Voting rights and electoral integrity are systematically undermined through voter suppression measures, gerrymandering, and disinformation campaigns, thereby maintaining the authoritarian regime's grip on power. Civic spaces shrink, educational institutions face ideological

pressures, and independent journalism is curtailed or suppressed, limiting public capacity for organized resistance. Despite the resilience provided by America's democratic traditions, historical precedents of institutional checks, and active civil society, this scenario remains a troubling possibility, with an estimated probability of approximately 40%. Once again, the chances of this scenario taking shape are 4 in 10.

## **Summary**

Collectively, these scenarios illustrate how America's political future hinges significantly on the roles played by influential economic and political actors, as well as on the broader socioeconomic and demographic dynamics shaping societal conditions. Whether the nation moves toward reconciliation, entrenched polarization, or authoritarian drift depends substantially on the strategic decisions made by power holders and how effectively underlying social and demographic challenges are addressed.

### **C. Is a Future U.S. Civil War Likely?**

While intense polarization, distrust, and even sporadic violence have emerged in recent years, the likelihood of a full-scale civil war in contemporary America remains relatively low. Though under serious threat, the U.S. still benefits from institutional safeguards, including an established rule of law, decentralized governmental structure, relatively strong federal institutions, though in the eyes of many the Executive Branch has overstepped its authority under Trump, and historically a civil society—all factors reducing the likelihood of widespread, sustained internal warfare. However, targeted acts of political violence, civil unrest, or localized conflict cannot be ruled out entirely, especially given the current degree of ideological fragmentation and social tension. Therefore, while a traditional, large-scale civil war is unlikely, the risk of increased episodes of politically motivated violence and instability remains tangible and concerning.

Recent articles and studies have examined the possibility of civil conflict in the United States, noting that while a full-scale civil war remains unlikely, many experts are increasingly concerned about the potential for widespread political violence and regional unrest. For example, a recent Politico article (2024) discussed how escalating partisan polarization, the normalization of violent rhetoric, and documented incidents of political violence have led some analysts to warn that the country is experiencing conditions that could, in a worst-case scenario, pave the way for localized conflicts or even a broader breakdown of democratic order. The article emphasizes that although most experts agree a traditional civil war is not imminent, the increasing distrust in institutions and deep cultural divisions are eroding the social fabric.

Similarly, an article in *The Atlantic* (2024) explored historical parallels and contemporary dynamics, arguing that America's deepening ideological divides—fueled by economic inequality, the pervasive influence of social media, and the erosion of civil norms—create an environment in which political disputes could potentially escalate into violent confrontations. This piece points out that while the notion of a civil war may be more of a metaphor for deep societal rifts than a literal prediction, the intensity of today's political conflicts suggests that the risk of sustained civil unrest is real. Additionally, scenario planning research by RAND Corporation (2020) has modeled potential future outcomes, concluding that while a conventional civil war is unlikely, the U.S. could face prolonged periods of civil disorder if current trends in polarization and institutional distrust continue unchecked.

#### **D. America's Obsession with Winning**

An article in *The Atlantic*, titled "*Football Has Always Been a Battleground in the Culture War*" (2017), explores the ways in which the competitive ethos of football has seeped into political discourse and national identity. The article argues that the values celebrated in football—such as toughness, strategy, and a meritocratic spirit—are mirrored in the political arena. It documents how political leaders and commentators increasingly use football metaphors to frame debates and mobilize supporters, suggesting that the sport's narratives of triumph and rivalry have contributed to heightened polarization and tribalism in American politics. The article also considers the cultural impact of the NFL, noting that its widespread popularity helps reinforce certain political ideals and perceptions of competition that resonate with a large segment of the electorate.

Similarly, Michael A. Messner's book *Game On: How Football Is Shaping America's Political Landscape* (2023), offers a comprehensive scholarly analysis of this phenomenon. Messner investigates the historical and contemporary intersections of football and politics, demonstrating that the sport's competitive nature not only influences political rhetoric but also helps shape political identities and behavior. The book discusses how football has been used as a framework to construct ideas about masculinity, leadership, and national pride. According to Messner, these cultural narratives have significant implications for political mobilization and policymaking, as they inform how voters interpret issues like national security, economic policy, and social values.

The dominant win-lose mentality inherent in American sports has profoundly shaped the nature of American politics, transforming political discourse into a zero-sum competition where compromise is often viewed as weakness and victory is the ultimate goal. In sports, teams strive unequivocally for decisive wins, framing competition as a binary of winners and losers; similarly, contemporary American politics has increasingly adopted this combative ethos, promoting intense partisanship, tribal loyalty, and hostility towards opponents.

Political issues are thus perceived less as opportunities for collective solutions and more as battles to be won, causing polarization and diminishing bipartisan cooperation. This sporting mentality fuels adversarial dynamics, where political leaders and supporters celebrate defeating opponents rather than pursuing shared progress, perpetuating deep social divides and obstructing the constructive governance essential to a healthy democracy.

### **E. What Could Bring Us Together?**

In the face of catastrophic climate collapse or an unprecedented global war involving the real threat of nuclear annihilation, humanity might find a shared sense of vulnerability powerful enough to transcend deep-rooted divisions. Imagine relentless environmental catastrophes—storms decimating coastlines, wildfires erasing towns, prolonged droughts devastating food supplies—bringing the stark realization that survival hinges upon cooperation, not competition. As cities drown and communities collapse, the distinctions of political ideology, cultural identity, and national boundaries fade rapidly, replaced by an urgent recognition of common destiny. America, once fractured by polarized debates, might be forced into collective action, uniting behind emergency response initiatives, technological innovations, and international diplomacy, not because ideological consensus was achieved, but because failure to collaborate would mean collective ruin.

Similarly, consider a new global pandemic emerging, more virulent and resistant than before, rapidly spreading despite humanity's desperate efforts at containment. Borders and biases become irrelevant as hospitals overflow and fear grips every community. Political rivalries previously thought irreparable dissolve under the shared imperative of survival, as scientists from adversarial nations cooperate, pooling resources and knowledge to accelerate vaccine and treatment developments. In this scenario, even the fiercest opponents would quickly realize that mutual suspicion and isolation guarantee mutual destruction. The experience of facing existential threats together could inspire a lasting solidarity—rooted not in ideological harmony, but in the profound humility and empathy that come from confronting shared fragility.

Let's hope it does not take these type of threats to accept that we must find a healthier way of relating with one another.

## **IX. Conclusion**

### **A. Summary of Key Points**

This analysis has explored the dynamic interplay between culture and politics in American society from the post-World War II era through 2025, emphasizing how cultural values, identities, and anxieties significantly influence political ideologies, policies, and outcomes.

Historically, periods of cultural optimism and conformity in the 1950s gave way to profound upheaval and activism during the 1960s and 1970s, resulting in lasting political transformations. The conservative resurgence of the 1980s reshaped cultural debates around race, gender, and morality, while subsequent decades witnessed heightened polarization, driven by economic uncertainty, technological advancement, globalization, and intensifying cultural anxieties.

The recent decades (2010s–2025) have been characterized by increased political fragmentation, the influence of digital media landscapes, and the rise of nationalist populism. Movements such as Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, and the Tea Party highlighted deep-seated societal divisions, reflecting conflicting cultural identities and priorities. The presidencies of Trump and Biden symbolized starkly different visions for American culture and politics, with Trump’s return to office in 2025 signaling continued ideological conflict and underscoring the strength of nationalist sentiments. International trends, including rising authoritarianism in Russia, China, North Korea, and parts of Latin America, along with the potential rightward shift in Germany, underscore the global resonance of these cultural-political dynamics.

Cultural identity and narratives continue to fundamentally shape voting behaviors, policy priorities, and ideological frameworks. Simultaneously, political decisions and media portrayals reinforce specific cultural norms, exacerbating polarization and extremism. To address these challenges, promoting sustained cultural dialogue, civic education, and political reconciliation is essential. While scenarios for America’s future range from optimistic reconciliation to sustained polarization or authoritarian regression, achieving stability and unity will require deliberate, collective efforts to bridge cultural divides and uphold democratic principles.

## **B. Final Reflections on the Culture-Politics Interplay**

The complex and reciprocal relationship between culture and politics remains central to understanding the trajectory of American democracy. Culture shapes politics by providing the symbolic framework within which political ideologies are defined, policies developed, and societal norms reinforced or contested. In turn, politics significantly influences cultural identities and narratives, embedding values into institutional structures and public consciousness. This interplay highlights that political polarization and cultural division are not merely symptoms of transient societal conflicts but reflect deeper, long-term processes of identity formation, cultural evolution, and ideological negotiation.

The persistent tensions explored throughout this analysis—between individualism and collective responsibility, traditional values and progressive change, nationalism and global interconnectedness—represent profound cultural struggles that continuously shape

political landscapes. Recognizing these struggles as cultural dialogues rather than irreconcilable divides offers pathways for constructive engagement and reconciliation. Indeed, societies thrive when they embrace cultural pluralism, recognizing diversity not as a threat but as a source of democratic strength and resilience.

As America moves forward, policymakers, educators, media organizations, and citizens must consciously engage with these cultural-political dynamics. Promoting civic education, supporting inclusive dialogue, and addressing the underlying cultural anxieties driving extremism and polarization are imperative for nurturing democratic health. The culture-politics interplay, if constructively managed, can foster vibrant democratic debate, policy innovation, and collective problem-solving. Ultimately, a healthy democracy requires balancing cultural diversity with a shared civic identity, cultivating mutual respect, understanding, and the enduring capacity for self-renewal and growth.

### **C. Recommendations for Fostering a Healthier Democracy**

Given the significant cultural and political challenges facing American democracy, several critical recommendations emerge as pathways toward fostering a healthier, more resilient democratic society.

Firstly, investing in comprehensive civic education for the public and at all educational levels is essential. Curricula should prioritize teaching democratic principles, critical thinking, media literacy, and intercultural understanding to equip citizens with the tools to navigate complex societal issues, counter misinformation, and engage constructively in public dialogue. Educational institutions should also facilitate experiential learning opportunities, including structured debates, community projects, and participation in civic institutions, empowering individuals to practice active citizenship.

Secondly, creating and supporting inclusive forums for cross-cultural dialogue and political deliberation is crucial. Establishing safe, accessible spaces for respectful conversations on contentious topics can help build trust and mutual understanding, breaking down ideological echo chambers. Local governments, civic organizations, universities, and community groups should partner to regularly host deliberative events that encourage open, empathetic engagement with diverse perspectives, fostering social cohesion and reducing political polarization.

Thirdly, strengthening democratic institutions and processes through targeted electoral reforms—such as ranked-choice voting, independent redistricting, campaign finance transparency, and voter protection measures—is vital. Such reforms can mitigate institutional incentives for extremism, increase accountability, and enhance public trust in democratic systems. Additionally, promoting responsible media practices and digital accountability is imperative. Social media platforms must actively counter misinformation,

ensure algorithmic transparency, and encourage balanced representation of diverse perspectives.

Finally, political leaders and influencers should consciously adopt rhetoric and practices that emphasize shared civic values, collective responsibility, and democratic norms rather than exploiting cultural anxieties or divisions for partisan advantage. Cultivating political leadership committed to bridging divides, promoting inclusivity, and reinforcing democratic integrity is indispensable to reversing current polarization trends.

Collectively, these recommendations provide a strategic framework for nurturing a healthier democracy—one capable of effectively addressing cultural anxieties, strengthening civic participation, and ultimately fostering unity and resilience within American society.

## **X. Questions Readers Might Consider Asking about this Paper**

1. Does the author make convincing arguments about how cultural changes directly influence political decision-making?
  - Understanding this relationship helps readers assess the validity and strength of the argument that cultural shifts impact politics.
2. Does the paper adequately demonstrate how political events reciprocally shape American culture?
  - Analyzing this bidirectional interaction is crucial to validating the central thesis of dynamic interplay between culture and politics.
3. What role does media (traditional and digital) play in reinforcing or disrupting the cultural-political interplay described?
  - Recognizing media influence helps readers grasp the mechanisms through which culture and politics are mediated and communicated.
4. How effectively does the author illustrate the historical continuity and shifts from the 1950s to today in the relationship between culture and politics?
  - Evaluating historical continuity is essential to understanding if current trends are unique or part of long-term developments.
5. What specific yardsticks does the author use to define political polarization and extremism?
  - Clarity in definitions enables readers to critically evaluate the paper's analysis of current political dynamics.



6. How does the paper justify the probability ratings assigned to future scenarios (reconciliation, entrenchment, authoritarian)?
  - Readers should question how these assessments were derived to gauge their credibility and accuracy.
7. Does the paper sufficiently address the potential biases or ideological leanings in the analysis of recent political figures, such as Trump and Biden?
  - Understanding potential biases is essential for evaluating the objectivity and fairness of the paper's arguments.
8. What solutions or recommendations does the author propose, and are they feasible given the current cultural-political climate?
  - Feasibility questions help readers critically assess whether the suggested approaches can realistically address polarization and extremism.
9. How does the author address global parallels and differences, particularly in authoritarian tendencies observed in other countries?
  - Comparative insights enrich the readers' understanding of the unique versus universal aspects of America's cultural-political dynamics.
10. What gaps or limitations exist in the author's analysis, and how might addressing these enhance the paper's conclusions?
  - Identifying gaps or limitations is important for readers to fully appreciate the scope, depth, and potential areas for future exploration.

## **XI. About the Author**

Don Iannone is a business strategy professor at the European Union-based Transcontinental University, specializing in systems-based strategy and change. He teaches students across the globe. He has supervised the PhD dissertations of business students in several countries. For almost 4 decades Don worked in economic development and public policy as a practitioner, teacher, and consultant, assisting over 100 public and private sector clients in 32 states and several countries with economic development strategies and policies. Don is the author of 26 nonfiction, fiction, poetry and photographic essay books. Don has written on American politics. His 2024 book, *America's Dream at a Crossroads, The 2024 Presidential Election and Beyond*, has garnered significant attention by the media and in political circles. He holds a PhD in philosophy and several other degrees, and lives in the Greater Cleveland area. His email is [diannone@gmail.com](mailto:diannone@gmail.com). Don is available

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