3

American Ideology

On another trip in Europe, my wife and I encountered some young students one evening. Over a convivial pitcher of beer (actually, several pitchers) we got to talking about different societies and cultures. One of these young men, perhaps emboldened by the quantity of beer he had consumed, leaned across the table and asked, "Tell me—what is America *really like?*"

I don't know about you, but I had no good answer on the spur of the moment. As is my unfortunate pattern, however, I thought of the right answer several hours later. If I had had my wits about me, I would have replied that there is no single America. I would have elaborated on the theme of diversity—how America is both New York City and rural Nebraska, how both mind-boggling affluence and grinding poverty exist in the same country, how America is beset by a bewildering array of racial, ethnic, regional, and other conflicts. Alas, I have never been asked that question since, but I do have a good answer ready now, in case anybody else should ask.

I realize that the United States is pluralistic, diverse, and fragmented in many respects. Nevertheless, I believe that Americans at the center of our politics think differently about the proper role of government than citizens at the centers of other industrialized countries do. In other words, it is fair to speak of a prevailing American ideology, which concentrates on limiting the power and reach of government. So the first cut at explaining why the United States is different from other industrialized countries is that we *think* differently. We have a different view of the proper authority, limits, and possibilities of government.

Alert readers will notice that I inserted the phrase, "at the center" of our politics, compared to the center of other countries' politics. Let's be clear what I mean by a "prevailing American ideology." I do not mean that all Americans hold to the same set of values. Indeed, as we will see, there have been quite different strains of American political thought through our history. I certainly do not want to argue that what I will characterize as a prevailing American ideology constitutes a dominant, hegemonic orien-

tation that drives out all other ideas. Far from it, indeed; there have been dramatic struggles over those ideas through the years.

The tenets of a prevailing American ideology, in my view, are widely shared at the center of our politics, and that center differs from the center in other countries. But I do not mean that every American agrees with these principles—far from it. Critics on the left, stretching from liberals to democratic socialists, believe that government should be much less limited. Critics on the right, from conservatives to libertarians, believe that government should be even more limited, at least in the realm of economics. (Some rightist critics, including the "religious right," favor more vigorous government regulation in social or moral spheres like abortion.) In the middle of the conventional left-to-right spectrum, however, I believe we can identify some shared ideological tenets. So by the term "prevailing" I mean that, despite our differences, the *center* of American politics distinctively favors limited government *more than* the political centers in other industrialized countries do.

There are also obviously a number of large, ambitious government programs in the United States. We do have a social security system, health insurance for the elderly and the poor, and the like, and those programs have been growing. But again, it's a matter of comparing our programs to those in other countries, which by and large are even more ambitious.

So when I speak of a "prevailing American ideology," I refer to the central tendency of our politics, not to the full dispersion of views around that center. I also concentrate on comparisons of American practices and ideas to those of other countries, rather than comparisons to some sort of ideal concept of what the size and reach of government should be. The intent of the chapter is to characterize the center of American politics and to argue that this center differs from the center of other countries.

I will elaborate on the content of that ideology in a moment, but let me first indicate its characteristics. First, "ideology" as I use the word does not necessarily mean a highly integrated, consistent belief system (Converse 1964). Depending on your tastes, you may prefer to think of a "body of ideas" or "philosophy" or "American thinking" or "political orientation." While I will use the word "ideology" as my shorthand, I hope that readers will not get hung up on the considerable scholarly controversies (see Kinder 1983) that swirl around the meaning of that word and the extent to which one finds ideological thinking in the mass public.

Second, the prevailing American ideology I will discuss has been quite stable over our history. Of course there have been changes. But a belief that government should be limited did not start with the congressional election of 1994. One finds a good deal of this thinking in the writings and speeches of the founders, for instance, and in the observations of Tocqueville in the early nineteenth century. We have fluctuated some, of course, swinging pendulum-style from bigger to smaller government and back again (Hirschman 1982, Schlesinger 1986). The patterns of our public policies

have also shifted through time, particularly in the direction of larger government in the 1930s and 1960s. Nevertheless, I will try to trace some continuity through our history, particularly continuity as compared to other countries.

Third and most important, the prevailing American ideology is distinctive. It's quite different from the working assumptions of most other countries. Even if we were to concede that there's a lot of difference of opinion in America, and that there has been considerable fluctuation over time, the central tendency of American political culture could still be distinctive. I argue that it is, in fact, particularly in the sense that American politics has a different center of gravity from the politics of other industrialized countries, a center that stresses limited government.

Let us now characterize that center of gravity, examining the tenets of this prevailing American ideology. We start by describing the content of this ideology. We then see what results flow from this American way of thinking about the role of government. In the course of that consideration of results, we'll be able to find some coherence in the differences between the United States and other industrialized countries that we described in the last chapter and summarized roughly as a pattern of limited government. We'll also be able to figure out why the "exceptions" to that description emerge. In other words, we'll develop an explanation for the differences between America and other countries, an explanation rooted in this American ideology. Finally, this chapter will examine the effects of these ideas, as opposed to the effects of institutions, on the shape of American public policy. Actually, we will observe that the issue is not so much "ideas as opposed to institutions" as it is "ideas in combination with institutions." In the next chapter we will speculate about where American ideology came from.

THE CONTENT

There have been many attempts to distill the essence of American political thought into a list of themes. Huntington (1981:14), for instance, says that the content of what he calls "the American Creed" includes constitutionalism, individualism, liberalism, democracy, and egalitarianism. Lipset notes in one book (1979) that the most important of American values are equality and achievement; in another (1990:26) he observes, "The American creed can be subsumed in four words: antistatism, individualism, populism, and egalitarianism"; then in a third (1996:31), "The nation's ideology can be described in five words: liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire." McCloskey and Zaller (1984:1) start their study of "the American ethos" with the following observation: "Two major traditions of belief, capitalism and democracy, have dominated the life of the American nation from its inception."

I don't know quite what to make of such lists. For the purposes of our discussion in this book, however, I will start with two aspects of American political thought, individualism and equality, because these two categories tend to include a lot of the other ideas that scholars have identified as significant parts of American political thought. As readers will see, for instance, our discussion of individualism will take us into other streams of American thinking (e.g., communitarianism). We will eventually conclude that various streams actually converge on a distinctive distrust of authority and preference for limited government. Similarly, our consideration of equality will consider various aspects of equality (e.g., equality of result versus equality of opportunity). As it turns out, many of the values on others' lists are closely connected to the central themes of individualism and equality. We will notice, for instance, that liberty, laissez-faire, capitalism, and antistatism are related to individualism, and so we will discuss them within that category.

INDIVIDUALISM

Many observers have remarked that Americans emphasize individual goals and individual advancement, rather than community goals or the advancement of public or collective purposes. This individualism is closely connected to the much-noticed tendency of Americans to prize liberty or freedom, that is, liberty or freedom for autonomous individuals. We mean freedom from authoritarian restraint, the dictates of hierarchy, or governmental limits. As McCloskey and Zaller (1984:18) point out, "No value in the American ethos is more revered than freedom. The rights of individuals to speak, write, assemble, and worship freely, to engage in occupations and pastimes of their own choosing, and to be secure from arbitrary restraints on their conduct are central to the nation's democratic tradition."

Hofstadter (1989:xxxvii) continues this theme. He argues that despite the differences between agrarian and industrialist, working class and upper class, there is an underlying unity in American thought centered on "the natural elevation of self-interest and self-assertion." He goes on: "The major political traditions have shared a belief in the rights of property, the philosophy of economic individualism, and the value of competition; they have accepted the economic virtues of capitalist culture as necessary qualities of man." Hofstadter (1963:227) also describes a traditional American "distrust of authority," which at various points in American history has been turned against political machines, big business, and government itself. This distrust, he claims, "gave tenacity to the most ardent supporters of the Revolutionary War. It helped impede the adoption of the Federal Constitution, it was invoked to justify secession, it caused Americans to postpone into the twentieth century governmental responsibilities that were assumed decades earlier among other Western societies."

Hartz (1955), to take another example, argues that a "liberal" ideology built on individualism dominated American political thought right from the beginning. (The term "liberal" in this context obviously is not the current popular usage—it means a philosophy of limited government, built on high value placed on individuals and individual rights.) He says that his analysis is based on "the storybook truth about American history: that America was settled by men who fled from the feudal and clerical oppressions of the Old World." (Hartz 1955:3) He goes on to develop his notion that American political thought found its roots in the writings of John Locke, who stressed the primacy of the individual, the importance of individual rights, and an insistence on imposing limits on authority in general, and governmental authority in particular, to further those individual rights. Hartz (1955:39) says that Americans had "a frame of mind that cannot be found anywhere else in the eighteenth century, or in the wider history of modern revolutions."

In contrast to this emphasis on individualism and liberalism (classically defined), other historians and political philosophers maintain that the early Americans and the founders were motivated by more communitarian, republican values. In this context, the term "republican" refers neither to the modern Republican Party nor to a system of representative government that stands counter to direct democracy. It refers instead to a community in which people, including elected officials, deliberate together to pursue their conception of the public good. By this reckoning, American political thought was not predominantly individualistic. Indeed, Americans placed a high value on community and devotion to the public good, sometimes called "civic virtue."

Wood (1969:53), for instance, argues: "The sacrifice of individual interests to the greater good of the whole formed the essence of republicanism and comprehended for Americans the idealistic goal of their Revolution. From this goal flowed all of the Americans' exhortatory literature and all that made their ideology truly revolutionary." Wood (1969:58) goes on to clarify what a pursuit of the public good entailed: "This common interest was not, as we might today think of it, simply the sum or consensus of the particular interests that made up the community. It was rather an entity in itself, prior to and distinct from the various private interests of groups and individuals." Pocock (1975) traces this republican tradition not to Locke's theories but to Aristotle's assumption that man is social by nature, and to Machiavelli's notions of civic virtue versus corruption.

A variant of the republican reading of the Revolution and the founders' ideas holds that America started out republican in the eighteenth century, but that a liberal ideology of individualism and limited government subsequently supplanted the original ideas and came to dominate the nation's political thought. Young (1996:11), for instance, argues that Hartz overreaches by claiming that liberalism dominated American political thought right from the beginning; he maintains that it gradually

gained dominance later. Wood (1992:326) dates the change to the early nineteenth century, culminating in the War of 1812, which heightened Americans' "pursuit of individual self-interest" (Wood 1992:327). In Wood's telling, the concept of the individual changed from individuals as civic beings to individuals as self-interested. Shain (1994:6) says, "America changed from being relatively communal in the 18th century to being far more individualistic in the 19th century." Sandel (1996:5) believes that liberalism—the notion that individual rights should be most important and that government should be limited—is "a recent arrival, a development of the last forty or fifty years." This version of liberalism, Sandel (1996:5) argues, gradually displaced its rival, a version of republican theory that had held sway earlier in American history, which required "a sense of belonging, a concern for the whole, a moral bond with the community whose fate is at stake." Common to these writers is the notion that despite the intellectual origins of the country, a more liberal, individualistic culture came to dominate American politics.

Other writers argue that neither liberalism nor republicanism aptly characterizes early American political thought. Shain (1994), for instance, maintains that a kind of religious communalism found in local, agrarian Protestant communities dominated eighteenth-century political thought. These local religious communities were not individualistic, Shain argues, in that they required the submergence of individual rights and wants in the community. Neither were they republican, he claims, in that they rejected such republican assumptions as attaining meaning through political and civic activity.

Still other recent authors argue that the dichotomy between liberalism and republicanism is artificial, and that the founders were actually quite skillful at combining them. Zuckert (1994:319) analyzes the writings of Locke and his contemporaries, from whom the founders freely borrowed, and argues that these writings are best characterized as designs for a "liberal republic." Zundel (1995:11) also holds that the "stark dichotomy" between liberal/individualistic and republican/communitarian traditions is "artificial and misleading," and that the two traditions borrowed freely from each other.

Other authors maintain that the various strains of American political thought, far from being compatible, actually coexist in a state of tension. Morone (1990:1), for instance, is struck by the importance of "The Democratic Wish," as he calls it, in which Americans both dread governmental power as a threat to their liberties and at the same time yearn for direct, communal democracy. He maintains (Morone 1990:18) that "liberalism is dominant," but that it is "repeatedly challenged by a recurring, subordinant ideology," a "communitarian spirit" (Morone 1990:73), which nevertheless is not really at the center of American politics. Bellah et al. (1985) also find a considerable tension between individualistic self-reliance and a yearning for community and meaningful relationships.

Smith (1993) points to what he calls "multiple traditions" in America, including such ugly ones as nativism, racism, and sexism. He argues that these do not lie "outside" American thinking, but are actually very much a part of it. Smith (1993:549) believes that "American political culture is better understood as the often conflictual and contradictory product of multiple political traditions than as the expression of hegemonic liberal or democratic political traditions."

Racism in particular continues to affect both American society and public policy. Quadagno (1994) argues that the 1960s War on Poverty, for instance, at first enjoyed a high degree of public approval. But as its beneficiaries became identified more and more as racial minorities, public support waned. According to this logic, welfare programs like AFDC also became more unpopular, as the stereotypical recipient according to public perception was an African-American unwed mother, even though in fact there were many more white than African-American welfare recipients. Opponents of welfare, job training, federal aid to urban areas, and other "big government" programs in both the 1930s and 1960s skillfully used American racism, the argument runs (Quadagno 1994:191,196), to buttress their more general antigovernment position by suggesting that the programs disproportionately benefited African-Americans. Opposition to the welfare state, therefore, has not simply been a straightforward expression of antigovernment ideas, this notion would have it, but has also been reinforced by a tradition of racism in America.

For the purposes of this book, I find it impossible, and probably unnecessary, to wade into, let alone settle, these disputes about the various traditions in American political thought and about the founders' philosophies. Whether the founders and subsequent Americans were liberal individualists or republican communitarians, or even driven by racism, I would argue that in the main they were still suspicious of government, skeptical about the benefits of government authority, and impressed with the virtue of limiting government.

On the face of it, individualists would think that way. They would emphasize private, individual advancement and individual rights and freedoms, and they would see considerable potential for government tyranny, which must be controlled. But even some of the more communitarian types, concentrating as they did on the local autonomy of religious communities, might think in quite similar ways about government threats to their freedom to live as they would like and as they believe is moral and right. And beyond the religious communities, it might be quite possible for deliberative republicans, interested in the common good, to reason together and come to the conclusion that government should be limited. As we will see in a moment, in fact, the writings of the founders do look a lot like that.

Both liberal and republican traditions, in other words, argue for limited government, each in its own way (Morone 1990:29). After reviewing

the sometimes incompatible strains in American political thought, Huntington (1981:33) summarizes the point:

> Logically inconsistent as they seem to philosophers, these ideas do have a single common thrust and import for the relations between society and government: all the varying elements in the American Creed unite in imposing limits on power and on the institutions of government. . . . The distinctive aspect of the American Creed is its antigovernment character. Opposition to power, and suspicion of government as the most dangerous embodiment of power, are the central themes of American political thought.

Again, we need to remind ourselves that we're thinking of America in comparative perspective. Of course we have by now built a version of the welfare state, of course the federal government's authority and reach has grown over the course of our history, and of course not all of these intellectual strains can be neatly subsumed into some sort of hegemonic ideology. But in this book, we're trying to understand America *relative to* other industrialized countries, not relative to some absolute sense of what would constitute a limited government. So I'm not trying to characterize American government as limited in some absolute sense or to claim that classical liberalism is the only hegemonic American political ideology. I'm simply arguing that the center of American political thought is considerably to the right of the center in other countries (using the label "right" in its contemporary colloquial sense of having a preference for smaller, more limited government).

Let's look at the founders for a moment. An excellent window into their political thought is *The Federalist*, a collection of essays originally published in the New York press in 1787–88. These essays were written to support the adoption of the Constitution of the United States, under which Americans still live today. The essays were published anonymously under the name Publius, but it soon became apparent that the authors were Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay. In addition to offering popular polemics in favor of the Constitution, these essays were quite remarkable statements of the founders' political philosophy, the intellectual underpinnings of the form of government which they designed.

They start with some pessimistic assumptions about human nature. "If men were angels," says *The Federalist, No. 51,* "no government would be necessary." But in the next sentence, they realize that government must not only control people's excesses but must itself also be controlled: "If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary." So both kinds of control are necessary: "You must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself."

The main device for accomplishing this control of government is to provide that no one part of government have a disproportionate share of power. Thus government powers are separated into different branches, each checking the other, and into national versus regional governments. As *The Federalist, No. 51,* sums it up, "Ambition must be made to counteract ambition."

One purpose the founders wanted their new governmental structure to accomplish was to "cure the mischiefs of faction" (*The Federalist, No. 10*), the tendency to faction being a "dangerous vice" in their view. Madison defined a faction as "a number of citizens, whether amounting to a majority or minority of the whole, who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community." The authors of *The Federalist* believed that the causes of faction were "sown in the nature of man," and particularly in "the various and unequal distribution of property." That belief brought them inescapably to the conclusion that "the *causes* of faction cannot be removed, [so] relief is only to be sought in the means of controlling its *effects*."

They used two major means: republican government and separation of powers. By "republican," in this usage of the word, they meant representative democracy as opposed to direct democracy. *The Federalist, No. 10,* discusses the dangers of direct democracy at length, and argues that it really can only work in small, contained settings like ancient Athens or New England town meetings. For larger polities like the new union, the people must elect representatives to act on their behalf. Their constitutional design provided for such direct election to the House of Representatives, and for indirect selection of senators (by state legislatures) and the president (by an electoral college). A major point of *The Federalist, No. 10,* was that in the founders' view, the excesses of majority faction could be controlled by these mechanisms of representation and by the insulation of government from direct democracy. And minority factions would be balanced by the majority rule inherent in elections.

The other means of controlling the effects of faction was the separation of the powers of government into different branches—legislative, executive, and judicial—and the provision of a federal system—the division of powers between national and state/local levels. At the same time, the founders provided for the famous principle of checks and balances, in which the different branches and levels would limit one another. That way, no faction, majority or minority, could capture control of the entire apparatus. Thus *The Federalist, No. 39,* points out that the republican form of government the founders envisioned "derives all its powers directly or indirectly from the great body of the people," thus limiting minority faction. But the division of its powers by the separation of powers, by a bicameral Congress, and by federalism combats popular power and majority faction. Indeed, *The Federalist, No. 47,* claims that "the accumulation of all powers,

legislative, executive, and juidiciary, in the same hands, whether of one, a few, or many, and whether hereditary, self-appointed, or elective, may justly be pronounced the very definition of tyranny."

Running through all of these ideas about the proper design of government are two themes. One is a desire to found government on the direct or indirect sovereignty of the people. The Federalists who drafted the 1787 Constitution created a political theory positing a direct link between the people and the national government that bypassed the states. But that government was representative rather than direct democracy (Wood 1969). The idea of sovereignty of the people, however, was combined with the second theme: profound suspicion of popular control of government. In the founders' design, for instance, the House of Representatives was the only part of the new national government that was directly elected.

Beyond those two themes, the institutions are grounded in an insistence that tyranny, whether from a majority or a minority, be combated, and that individual rights and privileges be protected from a potentially tyrannical government. Regardless of the balance or ascendancy between individual and communitarian values in American political thought, the result is a suspicion of authority and an emphasis on limited government.

EQUALITY

Sometimes it takes an outsider to understand. Alexis de Tocqueville was just such an outsider. A French aristocrat, he traveled in the United States for nine months in 1831–32. His observations during these travels were the basis for his much-acclaimed *Democracy in America*. Far from a simple description of America in the 1830s, this book is a remarkably shrewd commentary on American politics and society that still deserves our attention today.

Tocqueville was very much struck by the individualism that we have been discussing. Indeed, McCloskey and Zaller (1984:111) say he coined the word: "When Tocqueville set out to characterize the novel social orientation he found in the United States in the 1830s, he described it as 'individualism.' Although the word seems never before to have appeared in the English language, it so aptly characterized American culture that within a few years it was widely accepted as one of the nation's most distinctive traits."

Tocqueville also noticed a rich and diverse American civil society. By "civil society" most people mean a kind of "third sector," different from the two other sectors of government/politics and the economy/markets, which includes volunteer and nonprofit institutions, churches, clubs, athletic teams, musical societies, and close-knit neighborhoods. Tocqueville thought that this civil society was much larger, more vigorous, and more important in America than in other countries, and that Americans were much more engaged in these sorts of volunteer civic activities. The impor-

tance of American civil society, of course, fits with the emphasis on limited government. Suspicious of government authority, Americans might naturally look to voluntary institutions like churches or charities for solutions to problems that markets don't solve. This civil society, indeed, might well provide much of the communitarian fabric that would hold the country together, in a way that neither governments nor markets would. The traditional importance of this civil society in America is one reason that some observers (e.g., Putnam 1995) are alarmed at indications that it is now weakening, that civic engagement is eroding, volunteerism is declining, and people are less involved in community and neighborhood activities than they once were. Scholars are currently engaged in a vigorous debate about whether that weakening has actually taken place, what might have caused it, and what the future holds.

But Tocqueville was struck particularly by the emphasis on social and political equality in America. Of course, the Declaration of Independence had proclaimed that "all men are created equal." Expanding on that theme, Tocqueville began his classic *Democracy in America* as follows:

> Amongst the novel objects that attracted my attention during my stay in the United States, nothing struck me more forcibly than the general equality of condition among the people. I readily discovered the prodigious influence which this primary fact exercises on the whole course of society; it gives a peculiar direction to public opinion, and a peculiar tenor to the laws; it imparts new maxims to the governing authorities, and peculiar habits to the governed. . . . It has no less empire over civil society than over the government; it creates opinions, gives birth to new sentiments, founds novel customs, and modifies whatever it does not produce. . . . This equality of condition is the fundamental fact from which all others seem to be derived, and the central point at which all my observations constantly terminated.

Tocqueville, of course, was affected by his times and his background. He was accustomed in Europe to societies in which people were born into their station in life, social and economic classes were more clearly marked, and upward mobility was much less possible. He was himself born into a high station in France and took social, economic, and political disparities to be natural. Contrast this background, even after the French Revolution, with the America he saw. European and American class structures and opportunities for advancement were quite strikingly different.

While Tocqueville was favorably impressed with the extent of equality he found in America, he was also cognizant of its dangers. In *Democracy in America*, he wrote with some eloquence about the possibility of a "tyranny of the majority" in America. His worry was that our insistence on equality

would seriously erode the people's freedom and reverence for individualism. This erosion would come about, he argued, through the omnipotence of the majority. If people are equal, after all, then they settle disputes not by resort to authority or to expertise, but by taking a vote in which the majority rules. Whether the majority is right or informed doesn't matter; it's the majority. One could always argue against arbitrary authority such as a monarchy, Tocqueville thought, but one could not resist the moral authority of majority rule. The unfortunate consequence, he claimed, was a kind of sameness and disappearance of the very individualism Americans held so dear. "I know of no country," he said, "in which there is so little independence of mind and real freedom of discussion as in America." (See also Lipset 1979:106,137)

Tocqueville may have been only partially right. American equality, of course, did not extend to women and African Americans in the 1830s. Shklar (1991) points out, in fact, that slavery set up a fundamental contradiction to the principle of equality, the remnants of which have lasted to the present day. There were also obvious differences in the relative wealth of early Americans. Most of the founders enjoyed much more property and wealth than ordinary citizens did. Beyond that, Tocqueville's concern about a tyranny of the majority in America turned out to be rather controversial. The pluralism of the country and the incoherence of majorities for much of the time led Robert Dahl (1956) to argue more than a century after Tocqueville that, as a matter of fact, American politics was more like "minorit*ies* rule" rather than majority rule or minorit*y* rule.

Despite the obvious facts that the founders did not abolish slavery or bring women into full equality, Wood (1992) argues that the value the American Revolution placed on equality nevertheless set up the central justifications for subsequent successful efforts to free slaves, extend the franchise and other political and legal rights, and provide for greater economic and social mobility. Slavery, for instance, was simply incompatible with the intensely held principle of equality, and even though it took a long time, eventually that fundamental incompatibility brought about slavery's downfall. The founders' ideas thus had lasting power, well beyond their accomplishments in their own time, or even beyond their intentions. As Wood (1992:7–8) puts it, "The Revolution made possible the anti-slavery and women's rights movements of the nineteenth century and in fact all our current egalitarian thinking. The Revolution not only radically changed the personal and social relationships of people, . . . but also destroyed aristocracy as it had been understood in the Western world for at least two millennia."

To bring us back to our major task, that of comparing America to other advanced industrialized countries, it does seem that the class structure was less rigid, people were less firmly born into their station in life, and there was more occupational and geographical mobility in the United States than in other countries. Lipset (1977:103–110) argues that as sys-

tems have evolved over history, *actual* social mobility in the United States has come to be more similar to mobility in other countries than it was a couple of centuries ago, but that a big difference remains in the *value* that Americans place on equal opportunity and mobility. We don't need to demonstrate an American equality in some absolute idealized sense, or to argue that the country has no class, race, or other differences in wealth or power, to realize that in some respects (to be specified momentarily) the United States emphasizes equality more than other countries do.

There are different kinds of equality, however (see Rae 1981). Verba and Orren (1985), for instance, point out a difference between political and economic equality. Their analysis suggests that Americans are quite egalitarian in the political sphere, espousing the right to vote, free speech, and a disdain for aristocracy and privilege. But at the same time, Americans also tolerate and even prefer a great deal of inequality in the economic sphere, taking no particular exception to dramatic disparities in the incomes of rich and poor and opposing government programs designed to redistribute income. As Verba and Orren (1985:9) summarize the point, "Comparisons across a range of indicators reveal that the United States ranks among the most open and participatory of modern democracies when it comes to politics and among the least egalitarian when it comes to economic matters."

It has become common in the literature on equality to make a central distinction between *equality of result* and *equality of opportunity*. Americans apparently don't place much stock in equality of result. It is surely true that income disparities in the United States are extreme by comparison to other countries. In 1990, American households in the top decile of the income distribution had disposable incomes that were nearly six times greater than households in the bottom decile, compared to 4.0 in Canada, 3.8 in Britain, and 2.7 in Sweden (Topel 1997:55). When Burtless (1994:82) compared the overall poverty rate in the United States in the mid-1980s with the comparably calculated rates in six other industrialized countries, he concluded that the rate in the United States was the highest by far: 13.3 percent, followed by Canada, at 7.0 percent. The lowest rate among the seven was West Germany's 2.8 percent, while Sweden, France, Britain, and Australia ranged in between Germany and Canada. Much of the difference, according to Burtless, was due to the other countries' much more generous government programs affecting poverty: far longer-lasting unemployment benefits, children's allowances and subsidized child care centers, higher old-age and disability benefits, and guaranteed health insurance for their entire populations.

Disparities between rich and poor within the United States are also growing at a fast clip. Burtless (1996) shows that in 1969, income at the ninety-fifth percentile of adjusted personal income in the United States was a little less than twelve times income at the fifth percentile, while by 1993 it was more than twenty-five times as much. The very wealthy Ameri-

cans, in other words, are very wealthy indeed, and far more wealthy than the poor. As far as equality of result is concerned, the American rich are far richer than the relatively poor, that disparity is growing, and it's much greater than it is in other industrialized countries.

Americans could look at such a huge inequality of result and find it politically and even morally repugnant. But while some do, most don't. It's part of American ideology to believe not that the rich should be whittled down to size, but rather that we can all aspire to be rich one day, or at least that our children can. So it isn't our impulse to even out financial or other resources. Lipset (1996:75–76) cites a good bit of survey evidence to the effect that Americans favor government programs designed to even out income, provide jobs, or help the unemployed much less than citizens of other industrialized countries do. McCloskey and Zaller (1984:82) summarize their survey data: "Most Americans strongly—even overwhelmingly—support the notion that everyone should have the same *chance* to 'get ahead,' but they are uniformly negative toward suggestions that everyone must end up with the same economic rewards."

While equality of *result* isn't the American goal, equality of *opportunity* is. As Huntington (1981:38) observes, "Equality in American thinking has rarely been interpreted as economic equality in terms of wealth and income, but rather as equality of opportunity." This is supposed to be the land of opportunity. Immigrants traveled to America in the first place to take advantage of the opportunities that they thought awaited them in the New World. So far as I can tell, the power of this notion of equality of opportunity is quite uniquely American. The idea is that the country doesn't need to provide for income equality or other kinds of equality of result. If it provides equality of opportunity, the center of American thinking goes, then if people don't do well, it's their own fault (Lipset 1979:174). They failed to take advantage of the opportunities they had.

It's not the case, however, that equality of opportunity actually exists in the United States. Indeed, a considerable body of writing (e.g., Haveman and Wolfe 1994) shows that life chances at birth are strikingly unequal, divided by class, race, gender, and other variables. That is, people born into poverty, people whose parents had a poor education, African Americans, women, and others are disadvantaged from birth; they don't in fact have the same opportunities. But we're talking not about the objective facts but about a prevailing American ideology that differs from the ideology of people who inhabit other industrialized countries. And the power of this notion of equality of opportunity, at least as an ideal, is distinctively American, at least in the sense that the American center of gravity is different from the center in other countries.

The logic of equality of opportunity also justifies the *in*equality of result noticeable in the United States. Relative poverty is seen to be the responsibility of the poor—they didn't take advantage of their opportunities. Isn't that an interesting twist? Many Americans can rationalize the

tremendous income inequalities and the nagging presence of poverty by resorting to this concept of equality of opportunity. We can also rationalize our unwillingness to provide the sorts of ambitious government programs in such areas as health, welfare, and unemployment compensation that most other countries provide. If unfortunate people were regarded as the victims of forces beyond their control, or simply down on their luck, then we could see our way clear to having government provide for them: "There but for the grace of God go I." But if, in the land of opportunity, they're responsible for their own condition, then self-help rather than government help is the appropriate prescription. At most, government programs should be designed to enhance opportunity, but nothing more.

I'm not justifying this way of thinking about inequality of result and appropriate government remedies; I'm just describing it. Its validity does turn on the assumption that equality of opportunity in fact exists, which the research on life chances calls into question. But valid or not, I do think this intriguing reconciliation of inequality of result and equality of opportunity is part of what I'm calling the prevailing American ideology.

Vigorous debates are, of course, taking place both within the United States and within other countries about the validity of this notion of equality of opportunity. Some Americans do not agree with the prevailing notion that equality of opportunity justifies inequality of result, whereas some citizens of other countries do agree with it. But again, as I said at the outset of this chapter, I'm trying to describe the *center* in the United States, as compared with the center in other countries. It does seem that more Americans than others hold to the notion of equality of opportunity, which shifts the American debate to the right. One consequence could be that American social policies are less ambitious than those in other countries, and the American welfare state smaller. We'll have more to say about that connection between political thought and policy outcomes in a moment.

This notion of equality of opportunity also resolves an inherent tension between the values Americans place on individualism and on equality. If "equality" meant equality of result, then the value placed in equality would run directly counter to the value placed on individualism. After all, individualism implies the freedom of each person to achieve as much as he or she possibly can, which will inevitably result in disparities in financial or other attainments. That would indeed violate a principle of equality of result.

But if it means equality of opportunity rather than equality of result, then Americans can believe that successful individuals are simply the ones who achieved, based on the same opportunities as everyone else. They worked harder, were smarter, or had some other sort of advantage based on their individual merit. Wood (1969:71) points out that the American-style emphasis on equality of opportunity doesn't deny that some people turn out better than others. The difference, Wood argues, is that the inequality of result doesn't come from inherited wealth or social class.

Again, whether people actually do start on a level playing field is beside this particular point. In the prevailing American ideology, equality of opportunity is entirely compatible with individualism. So a concentration on opportunities rather than results resolves the inherent tension between the two central American values of individualism and equality.

A NOTE ON PUBLIC OPINION

Many of the arguments among scholars over whether there is a distinctive American political culture or a distinctive American ideology often involve analyses of public opinion data (e.g., Almond and Verba 1963). Scholars marshal survey evidence and study the general public in order to suggest that Americans value some things that Europeans don't value, or that American preferences about the appropriate role of government are or are not different from those of the citizens of other countries. I myself have referred to public opinion data in the pages you have just read. These disputes among scholars naturally raise the question of where political culture resides. If we want to characterize "Americans," *which* Americans should we study?

To make my position clear, if I were to look for the content of American ideology or American political culture, I probably wouldn't look only at the mass public. Or more precisely, I wouldn't rely on survey data of the general public as my only indicator of political culture or ideology. I would want to know quite a lot about elite political culture as well as mass political culture. Why?

The main reason for not looking only at the mass public to measure American ideology is that the thinking that matters for much of what we want to understand in this book is to be found elsewhere. If I had wanted to know about American ideology at the time of the founders, for instance, I wouldn't have relied solely on a public opinion survey, even if one had been available, because the ideology that mattered was the ideology held by the leaders who drafted the Constitution and argued for its adoption.

It's true that in a representative democracy such as ours, ideas in the mass public do affect election outcomes, and so do provide a kind of general constraint or direction to our institutions and public policies. People do have opinions, they act on their opinions (Page and Shapiro 1992), and legislators pay attention to their constituents' opinions (Jackson and King 1989; Kingdon 1989). In that sense, elections and the institutions of representative government do provide a specific mechanism by which popular values are related to public policies. Those popular values, however, are not always those of ordinary Americans (Kingdon 1989:Chs.2,12). The mass public constrains elected officials, but attentive and activist publics constrain them more tightly.

To study the prevailing American ideology, I'd prefer to look at the writings of Madison, for instance, or the speeches of contemporary elected

leaders, at least as much as opinions in the mass public. Those are the folks who have prevailed, after all, and are responsible for the major directions that the country has taken in institutional design and in public policy. It's much more important that President Clinton declares in 1996 that "the era of big government is over" (whether it is or not) than that Joe Sixpack thinks so.

Indeed, McCloskey and Zaller (1984:234), clearly analysts of mass public opinion data, trace opinions in the mass public to opinions at the elite level: "When most opinion leaders agree on a given issue, the more politically sophisticated members of the general public tend to learn and adopt the elite norm as their own. When they disagree, however, the members of the public who are politically aware begin to divide in ways that mirror the disagreements among the opinion leaders." So the elite level affects the mass level as much as, or perhaps even more than, the other way around.

Nevertheless, survey data exist on some of the topics we have been discussing that can supply additional information on American ideas. In a very general sense, those survey data bear out the description of American ideology that I have presented here: a distinctive belief in limited government. One study (reported in Heidenheimer et al. 1983:321) asked respondents in several countries how much responsibility they thought government should have in education, health care, housing, old age security, and employment. Popular support for government action in all of these areas was lowest in the United States. When other surveys, conducted in forty-three countries, asked people whether there should be more government ownership of business and industry or more private ownership, the United States was the world's leader in favoring private over government ownership (Inglehart 1997:263). Lipset (1996) marshals public opinion data that compare preferences and values in various countries to show that Americans distinctively favor freedom to develop without hindrance, as opposed to equality of income (p 72); oppose government policies designed to redistribute wealth (pp 72–73); favor freedom over equality (pp 101, 145); favor financial rewards for reliability, hard work, and efficiency (p 144); and favor government programs to promote equality of opportunity, but not equality of result (p 145).

In fairness, the picture isn't completely one-sided. There is some survey evidence, for instance, that the American public would prefer an increasing government role in health care, and even some sort of comprehensive national health insurance (Steinmo and Watts 1995:332). Both Steinmo and Watts (1995) and King (1973) argue that Americans prefer the extension of existing social services and the establishment of new ones at about the same rate as citizens of other countries. Their point is that public policies seem to be neither a simple translation of public preferences into government actions nor a governmental response to public demand; if they were, U.S. policies would not look so different from those

of other countries. But as Free and Cantril (1967:36) show, this approval of government programs clashes with people's ideology of distrust of government, resulting in Americans as "operational liberals, ideological conservatives." There is a difference between preferences and culture, in other words, a point to which I return below. In addition, Stimson (1991) shows that public opinion shifts a good bit from one time to another, as opposed to exhibiting lasting cultural verities.

Some of these arguments simply reinforce the position that the mass public is not the only place to find political culture, and that survey evidence may not tell the whole story. After all, if we're speaking of *political* culture, the place to find it is among people who are political (White 1995b). Beyond that point, it's difficult to interpret surveys in which people say they favor some proposal. In response to questions, people favor many things, and it's not entirely clear how they themselves would translate those preferences into policies. They may favor national health insurance in the abstract, for instance, but still be quite responsive to arguments against a "big government takeover of health care" (White 1995b). To cite another example (Steinmo 1993:17), people are charmingly prepared to favor lower taxes, increased government benefits, and a balanced budget all at the same time.

Recognizing the ambiguities and even contradictions in the public opinion data, it's still fair to conclude that public opinion is very roughly consistent with the characterization of American ideology I have set forth. Americans, more than citizens of other industrialized countries, favor limited government and stress individual advancement over collective purposes. When it comes to equality, Americans distinctively favor equality of opportunity, but not equality of result. We found these themes strikingly true in our discussion of individualism and equality, and not substantially contradicted in the opinions of the mass public. Again, it's important to emphasize that we're making comparisons among countries here, not trying to assess American values and preferences in relation to some abstract ideal. Americans need not be "essentially" or "uniformly" individualistic, for instance, but only "relatively" so compared to citizens of other industrialized countries.

Page and Shapiro (1992:118) present one rather good summary of the state of American public opinion, which captures both this emphasis on individualism and the emphasis on equality of opportunity. After going through a number of survey findings that show rather stable opinions on economic welfare issues over the years since the 1930s, they state:

> This configuration of preferences reflects a fundamental individualism that esteems individual responsibility and individual initiative, and relies primarily upon free enterprise capitalism for economic production and distribution. Yet it also reflects a sense of societal obligation, a

> strong commitment to government action in order to smooth capitalism's rough edges, to regulate its excesses, to protect the helpless, and to provide a substantial degree of equal opportunity for all.

The extent to which and, more important, the *ways* in which the values and preferences of ordinary citizens matter is of course another question. For instance, Page and Shapiro (1992:117) show that at the height of the deregulation movement in public policy in the 1970s and 1980s, there was very little public support for deregulation. So public policy is not made by some simple translation of popular preferences into government action. Rather, the public sets fairly broad constraints on government action, within which policymakers have considerable discretion (Kingdon 1989:68,288). We will return to that question at the end of this chapter, when we try to sort through the swirl of arguments among scholars about the importance of institutions, as opposed to the importance of culture or ideology.

SOME RESULTS OF AMERICAN IDEOLOGY

We have argued that Americans think about the proper role of government in a distinctive way. If Americans hold on to the tenets of this prevailing ideology, then that ideology affects the differences between the United States and other industrialized countries described in Chapter 2. So let's think about the consequences of American ideology for the structure of the nation's governmental institutions, the strength of its political parties, and the shape of its public policies.

Institutions

The prevailing American ideology I have just described starts with the impulse to limit government. That impulse left a completely clear mark on American governmental institutions. In their desire to combat the evils of faction and guard against government tyranny, the founders deliberately erected a governmental structure that would make government action difficult. The separation of powers, checks and balances, a bicameral Congress, and a federal system were all designed to ensure that no one faction could capture power, and that mobilizing this cumbersome apparatus for action would be extremely difficult. The design of an independent judiciary, furthermore, provided another check on government action (Skowronek 1982) and added a protection for minorities against majorities (Casper 1976). The founders' philosophy of government thus clearly affected the institutions they designed. And that philosophy, emphasizing

as it does the desirability and necessity of limiting government, very much conforms to the features of the prevailing American ideology I have just described.

It's possible, of course, that the founders' ideology didn't translate into their governmental design. Instead, they could have adopted their chosen design for some other reasons, and arguments such as those in *The Federalist* could have been rationalizations. But as I have argued elsewhere (Kingdon 1993), a given communicator's words tell us a lot about the world around that communicator. The words are constructed to appeal to an audience, and the writer builds arguments on the values of that audience in order to persuade them. Even if the writers of *The Federalist,* for instance, did not really hold to the ideas they enunciated (a remote possibility, to my mind), their essays still reflect the ideas of the larger set of people to whom they were appealing. Thus it is likely that the rhetoric of limited government struck a responsive chord in the attentive public of the time.

POLITICAL PARTIES

Let's think for a moment about what broad-based, large political parties do. Fundamentally, parties mobilize majorities for elections and organize for government action when in office. Interest groups represent narrower, sometimes extremely narrow, interests. But political parties aggregate those interests together into diverse coalitions, with the aim of capturing a majority of votes in elections. That's most obviously true in two-party systems in which one of the two parties becomes a governing majority. But even in multiparty systems where elections are based on proportional representation, in which each party may represent a minority of the electorate, a majority coalition in the parliament must still be constructed. Thus strong political parties would have the potential for bridging the separation of powers and federalism, and for mobilizing even fragmented government institutions for action.

This aggregative character of political parties runs squarely counter to the traditional American emphasis on individualism and autonomy. Americans seem to want to avoid subordinating individual rights and privileges to some sort of collective organization like a party. That's one reason the American system of representation emphasizes the autonomous individual legislator, responsive to and accountable to his or her own constituents rather than to party leadership. Most of my American students, for instance, find it very odd that parliamentarians in other countries vote in lockstep with their party leadership. We Americans prize the fragmentation and decentralization we have constructed; and we're suspicious of aggregation or collectivization.

The Progressives set about to weaken political parties early in the twentieth century. I described in the last chapter the measures that weakened parties, including the use of direct primaries rather than caucuses of party

activists to nominate candidates, and the erosion of patronage as a serious party-maintaining mechanism. The Progressives' dual commitments to broader democratic participation through such devices as the direct primary and the ballot initiative on the one hand and to decision making by experts through such devices as regulatory agencies and a professional civil service on the other are often seen as antithetical. But Balogh (1991) argues that both themes were attacks on well-organized and well-financed interests that the Progressives thought were plundering the country, such as corporations, railroads, trusts, monopolies, and corrupt political parties.

There was nothing inevitable or predetermined about the Progressive era, and no Hartzian liberal consensus guided the outcomes. Progressive reforms were not enacted without tremendous battles over a long period of time, and they were instituted only partially. Skowronek (1982) shows, for instance, that the expansion of administrative capacities favored by the Progressives was actually something of a jerry-built patchwork compared to the administrative states of Europe. As Balogh (1991:144) puts it, "The resistance of politicians wedded to a more decentralized and partisan system of politics combined with the pervasiveness of the antistatist strain in American political culture severely restricted the development of federal administrative mechanisms."

There is some doubt, as I said in the last chapter, about whether the weakening of parties was the main aim of the Progressives or a by-product of their attack on privilege and corruption. Either way, weaker parties meant an erosion in the ability to aggregate interests and to mobilize government to action. And either way, the reforms were also closely linked to what I have described the prevailing ideology at the center of American politics. The Progressive reform proposals, in other words, fell on the fertile ground of American suspicion of the concentration of wealth and power. If Americans prize individualism, autonomy, and decentralization more than other countries do, then it makes perfect sense to attack arrangements that centralize and aggregate. Since parties do those things, therefore, it makes sense to weaken them.

We will have more to say about the genesis of movements to weaken political parties, including the assault on urban machines, in the next chapter.

Public Policy

The American emphasis on individualism and limited government has obvious direct consequences for the shape of our public policies. As King (1973:418) puts it, "The State plays a more limited role in America than elsewhere because Americans, more than other people, want it to play a limited role."

First, Americans don't tolerate taxes very well. Citizens of other industrialized countries complain about taxes, of course. But their attitude

seems quite different. They seem to realize that government is supposed to provide for certain collective purposes and that taxes are the inevitable accompaniment of those implicit collective decisions. If they decide that government should finance national health insurance and passenger rail service, for instance, then they regard raising the revenue to accomplish those ends through taxation as the logical consequence of such a decision.

We Americans, by contrast, seem to see taxes as devices for confiscating what is rightfully ours. As fiercely autonomous individuals, we believe we are entitled to our wealth, and that taxes take away the wealth that it is our natural right to obtain and keep. This country was born in the aftermath of the Boston Tea Party, after all, a classic protest against taxes. And this attitude toward taxation has lasted right down to the taxpayer revolts that have swept across the country in the last couple of decades.

Recollect, for example, what has happened to recent presidential candidates or presidents who have even hinted that raising taxes would be part of the way to eliminate the federal budget deficit. Walter Mondale told the 1984 electorate that he would raise taxes, apparently thinking that voters would reward him for his honesty, and was crushingly defeated. George Bush told the electorate in 1988 to "read my lips—no new taxes," and was elected. Then he agreed to tax increases in the budget compromise of 1990. His dramatic words about lipreading came back to haunt him in the election of 1992, when Pat Buchanan replayed Bush's videotaped pledge in primary after primary, mortally wounding his general election candidacy. Bill Clinton's deficit reduction in 1993 included tax increases, particularly on the most wealthy individuals. He was rewarded in the congressional election of 1994 with the first Republican-controlled House of Representatives in forty years, and subsequently wondered out loud about whether the tax increases had been a good idea. Although each of these election results were due to multiple causes, of which tax policy was only one, the lesson from this recent experience still seems hard to escape: Don't raise taxes. Don't even think of raising taxes. Certainly don't think out loud about it. And if you must do it, figure out a way to hide it.

Beyond taxes, in Chapter 2 I described many areas of public policy in which American government programs are much less ambitious than those of other industrialized countries. Our programs in health, welfare, housing, transportation, and many other areas are much smaller and less ambitious. And the public sector as a proportion of GDP is noticeably smaller.

This general pattern of public policy is a direct result of the American ideology of limited government described above. Americans see many areas as private that citizens of other countries see as public. People in country after country think of various activities as "naturally" a public or governmental responsibility that Americans think of "naturally" as something that private individuals should provide for. King (1973:418) summarizes these American beliefs as a series of what he calls "catch phrases: free enterprise is

more efficient than government; governments should concentrate on encouraging private initiative and free competition; government is wasteful; governments should not provide people with things they can provide for themselves; too much government endangers liberty; and so on."

Take health insurance as an example. All other industrialized countries have some version of national health insurance that covers the entire population (White 1995a). It may be financed directly by taxes or indirectly by employer mandates, but government does enact policies that provide for universal health insurance coverage. In the United States, by contrast, many people purchase health insurance privately or get it as a fringe benefit from their employer, government fills in some of the gaps with programs for the poor (Medicaid) and the elderly (Medicare), but some of the population is left uncovered. Even the first Clinton administration's ill-starred health care proposal, which its opponents portrayed as the essence of big government, relied on an elaborate system of purchasing alliances in order to *avoid* setting up a direct government program. President Richard Nixon once defended his health care proposal, which relied on employer mandates, by saying that government-run national health insurance wasn't "the American way." Indeed.

Scholars sometimes argue that a theory that attributes a given American public policy to a general feature of the American political culture misses the distinctive properties of that particular policy arena. According to this view, a theory that attributes the absence of national health insurance to the general American distrust of government, for instance, misses the importance of the particular configuration of interest groups involved in health care policy. But in a way, that's the point. This pattern of limited government policies, compared to other countries, is so common across so many policy arenas that there must be something larger at work than the politics and economics of any single arena.

So the prevailing American ideology of limited government ties in quite directly to smaller, less ambitious government policies in area after area. But what mechanisms tie ideology to policy? A major link between this ideology and public policy is the mechanism of elections, because elections imply both the importance of mass, attentive, and activist publics and the need for politicians to appeal to those publics for support. Those appeals, my argument runs, are particularly successful in America when they strike the chords of limited government and individualism, which resonate more strongly in America than in other countries. Thus the pattern of public policy is closely linked to the way we think about the proper role of government.

"Exceptions" to the Policy Pattern

In Chapter 2, we noticed some supposed exceptions to the general pattern of limited public policies. Public education, for instance, enjoys a

much firmer and more long-standing tradition in the United States than in other industrialized countries. American government regulation in some areas seems to be more intrusive than in other countries. America is comparatively litigious, and the criminal justice system is more far-reaching. The U.S. military establishment is large. It is time now to explain those exceptions in terms of American ideology.

A few pages back, I highlighted the distinctive American concept of equality of *opportunity,* as opposed to equality of *result.* America doesn't strive for greater equality in incomes, for example, and doesn't insist that government provide equal services to everybody. But Americans, partly because they think of this country as "the land of opportunity," are willing and even eager for government to provide for equal opportunity. If people are given opportunity, the central thinking goes, and then don't get ahead, it's their own fault and not the responsibility of government to rectify.

That concept of equality of opportunity explains Americans' distinctive support for public education (King 1973:420). The United States is a world leader in government (federal, state, and local) support for schools at elementary, secondary, and university levels. Education doesn't necessarily level incomes or status, but it does supposedly provide the skills and knowledge that people need to take advantage of opportunities. That's why Americans make an exception to their usual opposition to big government for education. When I was interviewing members of Congress in an earlier piece of research (Kingdon 1989), I was struck by the extent to which even the most conservative, rock-ribbed, antigovernment Republicans were willing to make an exception for education. Education provides for opportunity, the thinking goes, and people are usually willing to pay the price in taxes for this purpose. Whether education actually does make opportunities equal or whether America actually is the land of opportunity might be factually in dispute. But the package of ideas that make up the prevailing American ideology, which includes the concept of equality of opportunity, is very much related to the supposed "exception" of support for government-operated public education.

Equality of opportunity is also related to other policy areas in sometimes subtle ways. Heclo (1986:321) argues that the Great Society programs in the 1960s, including Medicare, Medicaid, aid to education, and the poverty program, were "wrapped up in a concept of *opportunity* for the disadvantaged that seemed fully in tune with the American political philosophy." He goes on to emphasize the significance of what did *not* happen, as well as what did happen: "By way of contrast, there was little inclination at that time on anyone's part to take on the much more politically difficult task of selling the American people on a major program of social reconstruction and income redistribution." Thus does this unusual combination of opportunity with individualism in American ideology guide poverty policy, and many other policy areas as well. Affirmative action, for instance, whether you support it or oppose it, is intended to further equality of opportunity.

Let's turn to regulation, another seeming exception to Americans' opposition to intrusive government. The apparent greater American government regulation of some aspects of private activity, which seems paradoxical, is actually related to the prevailing ideology in some interesting ways. We noticed that individualism prompts Americans to object to taxation and to resist the expensive government programs that are the norm in other industrialized countries. That drive to keep government small paradoxically sometimes prompts vigorous government regulation. It works this way: In other countries, when faced with a given problem, the impulse is to create a government program to deal with it—a program that spends public money and raises it through taxation. In the United States, the impulse is to leave the activity in the private sector, but then to regulate it, either by government regulation or by private rights of action in court. Thus Americans regulate instead of tax. Fuel consumption, for instance, is discouraged by creating a federal system of corporate average fuel economy standards or mandating electric cars in California—regulatory devices—rather than by raising gasoline taxes sharply (Nivola and Crandall 1995).

That same dynamic leads to American litigiousness, which turns out to be a form of social regulation through private actions in court. We noticed earlier that lawyers and courts do things in America that bureaucrats do in other countries (Kagan and Axelrad 1997). As Nivola (1997:25) puts it, "Americans may be trading lower levels of government interference and direct taxation for a greater frequency of costly civil actions." Instead of having government agencies forcing businesses to protect consumers or employees in various ways, for instance, consumers or employees are allowed to bring suit in court. To take another example, government agencies don't drum incompetent doctors out of their practices; aggrieved patients bring malpractice suits instead. Environmental regulation is sometimes accomplished in the United States by passing laws that give individuals the right to bring suit in court against polluters, or give polluters the right to sue others to contribute to cleanup costs. Accident and injury victims are reimbursed in many other countries through publicly financed compensation funds; in the United States, they sue. Instead of treating issues such as health or welfare as matters of social insurance, as they are in many other countries, Americans treat them as individual rights. Thus resources that could be spent simply on insurance are spent instead on litigation (Kagan and Axelrad 1997). Other countries often provide government subsidies to employers to hire and retain disabled workers; the United States offers such workers recourse to the courts instead (Burke 1997). The whole phenomenon of class action suits in America's tort litigation system is a way to accomplish in court what other countries often achieve by bureaucratic regulation. The legal systems of many other countries, furthermore, do not allow contingency fees, thus sharply reducing incentives for lawyers to represent aggrieved parties in negligence suits.

Nivola (1997) provides many examples of this American pattern of accomplishing social regulation through litigation, which springs from laws that grant private rights of action, rather than through action by government bureaucracies.

This tendency is directly related to the distinctive American avoidance of government programs that this book has already examined. In line with American individualism, we provide for individuals to take action by hiring a lawyer and bringing suit. And consistent with American distrust of government, we encourage remedies through the courts rather than through government programs administered by executive branch agencies. Little wonder that we end up with an abundance of lawyers.

Kagan (1991) calls this a system of "adversarial legalism." Kagan and Axelrad (1997:154–55) argue that adversarial legalism

> is not an arbitrary choice. It reflects a political tradition that from the nation's beginnings harbored antipathy for hierarchically organized, concentrated government power. . . . The demands for an activist agenda are channeled through governmental and economic structures that reflect the traditional mistrust of concentrated power and a reluctance to pay the high taxes that support European-style bureaucracies and welfare programs. . . . Lawsuits, rights, penalties, lawyers, courts, and juries thus are the U.S. substitutes for the powerful central bureaucracies, corporatist bodies, central banks, and *keiretsu* that dominate the social regulatory regimes of other advanced democracies.

Nor is the importance of courts and litigation a recent development. Skowronek (1982) points to the strength of courts and the weakness of bureaucracy in nineteenth-century America. He shows that a version of an American administrative state was created in the early part of the twentieth century, but obviously court power and bureaucratic weakness remain.

There is a good bit of writing these days about America as a "litigious society." We noticed in Chapter 2, indeed, that the United States has more lawyers per capita and more tort litigation costs as a percentage of GDP than any other industrialized country, and by a wide margin. But the preceding analysis suggests that American litigiousness is not simply a straightforwardly cultural trait. Instead, it is clearly related to deliberate public policy decisions that have been made at all levels of government. As a part of our distinctive prevailing ideology, Americans at the political center tend to oppose taxation, distrust bureaucracy, and eschew "big government," more than people at the political center of other countries do. Thus in order to accomplish certain social objectives in this country, public policies provide for people to go to court instead of establishing the government subsidies or programs that other countries have. Litigiousness is

related to American ideology, all right, but via this rather subtle route of affecting public policies through deliberate choices made in the context of governmental institutions, instead of being the direct cultural effect, as is often assumed. And as for solutions to the tremendous cost of litigation in the United States, as Kagan and Axelrad (1997:181) say, "Curbing adversarial legalism may not always be easy to reconcile with a quest for smaller government," because governmental programs, subsidies, and regulation would be required to achieve many of the objectives that litigation supposedly seeks.

To turn to another "exception," even the comparatively high levels of crime and incarceration in the United States may be related to American ideology, albeit in an odd way. Lipset (1991:31) claims that the crime rate is related to the emphasis on individualism and opportunity. Since, as the mythology goes, America is a land of opportunity in which individuals' paths to success supposedly aren't blocked by class barriers or artificial economic structures, then economic failure is seen more as the individual's fault than is the case in cultures that emphasize barriers to advancement (e.g., unalterable class or social station), which are beyond the individual's control. If you're unemployed, for instance, Americans see your situation more as your own fault and less due to economic cycles or structures beyond your control than people in other countries do. This view affects American orientation toward many public policies, as we have seen. There is willingness to provide for opportunity, for instance, but not for income redistribution as a way of combating poverty.

But oddly enough, this thinking might also be related to a resort to crime. Crime is another way, Lipset speculates, albeit an unconventional and illegal way, to seize your opportunities in the land of opportunity, and to achieve the individual financial success that Americans prize. Beyond that, I would add, some expressions of individualism can be more heavily regulated in other countries than in the United States. Great Britain, for instance, simply banned private ownership of handguns in 1997, an unthinkable government action in this country. American gun owners' insistence that their constitutional right to bear arms extends to handguns, from this perspective, is simply an extension of a more general American insistence on individual rights, albeit taken to an extreme in terms of cross-national comparison.

We also noted in Chapter 2 that American governments criminalize some activities that are not treated as criminal in many other countries. Smoking is now banned in public places across the country, for instance; prostitution is illegal in most localities; American speed limits are lower than they are in France or Germany, and speed traps are unknown in some countries; gambling is much more strictly regulated than in Britain; some states' sodomy laws criminalize homosexual contact between consenting adults; and so on. This criminalization of more activities obviously leads to more offenses. These sorts of government regulation do not seem to square

entirely with the emphasis on individualism that I have been discussing. But it's possible that this American tendency springs from another theme in American political life, a distinctive strand of moralism which may be related to the early importance of Protestant sects, which we will discuss in the next chapter. This point is obviously speculative, but it could be that this moral code frowns on and even criminalizes activities that in other countries would be legal and even acceptable.

Our final "exception" is national defense. We noted in Chapter 2 that the United States has a much larger military establishment than an ideology of limited government would dictate. Part of the explanation, of course, may have little to do with American ideology. Superpower status has its costs, for example, and the United States has been thrust into a position of international leadership during this century. But some of the explanation may be related to American ideas. A considerable part of the justification for a larger defense establishment in the second half of the twentieth century was the Cold War, and the threat that communism posed to American interests. Communism was seen not only as a threat to American business interests but also as a threat to "the American way" or to American ideas. Of course there was a pork-barrel aspect to defense spending, as localities and industries benefited from procurement, bases, and the like. But pork itself could be provided in other ways, like mass transit and other government spending. So why this way? I think defense spending was related to anticommunism, which in turn was very much bound up in the prevailing American ideology. From that point of view, it's no accident that defense spending has been declining as a porportion of the federal budget since the end of the cold war—we don't see the same threat.

INSTITUTIONS AND IDEAS

Scholars are engaged in a lively discussion about the relative importance of institutions and ideas in determining the patterns of a country's public policies. One can classify some writers in the "cultural" or "idea-based" camp. To these scholars, the major source of national differences in public policy is the differences in the countries' philosophies of government. In a country like the United States, they argue, there is simply a great skepticism about government and a high value placed on limiting government. Other scholars are in the "institutional" camp. They don't believe that differences in political culture explain public policy outcomes very well and point instead to the consequences of institutional arrangements. They see parliamentary governments as more capable of being mobilized for action than governments based on separation of powers, for instance.

One "idea-based" scholar is King (1973), who begins by describing the differences between the public policies of the United States and those of other countries and noting that, with a few exceptions such as public edu-

cation, America is distinctive in its smaller government and less ambitious public policies. He then goes through a number of possible explanations for that distinctiveness, discarding each in turn. With regard to institutions, despite the fact that American institutions—separation of powers, checks and balances, bicameralism, federalism, weak political parties, and powerful courts—are unwieldy, King still argues that American government is fully capable of mobilizing for action if the situation warrants it. Indeed, it has done so, as the case of governmental responses to the Great Depression in the 1930s shows. In other words, institutional barriers to action can be overcome, and the differences between the United States and other industrialized countries must lie in the different ideas that dominate their respective politics. In this country the option of ambitious government programs, in one policy arena after another, tends either not to arise or not to be taken seriously in the first place. During the New Deal period of the 1930s, for instance, Franklin Roosevelt did not propose comprehensive national health insurance, as King points out, and America considered only health insurance for the elderly and poor in the 1960s. The institutional weaknesses and barriers could be overcome, King argues, if such options were on the table, but Americans don't take these options seriously because they hold to a philosophy of limited government.

A number of other scholars fall into this "culturalist" or "idea-based" category. Although the following capsule description oversimplifies his writing somewhat, Lipset (1979, 1996) stresses the importance of overarching American values, such as individualism, laissez faire, and equality of opportunity. Huntington (1981) speaks of an "American Creed," which emphasizes some of the same values. Inglehart (1997) compares values in many countries, describing differences among countries and changes over time. And much of this chapter has stressed the prevailing themes in American culture and American political thought.

Other writers who compare public policies across countries are quite skeptical about explanations for the policy differences among countries that concentrate on differences in culture, ideology, values, or prevailing philosophies. Steinmo (1994:106), for instance, although agreeing that "the rhetoric and symbolism of individualism is particularly strong in America," still concludes that "the most common and obvious explanation for America's exceptionally small state—that we have a uniquely individualistic political culture—is wrong." He thinks that a cultural explanation cannot account for change over time, that the culture contains contrasting elements that therefore can't guide public policy decisions very well, and that the causal mechanisms that would link culture to policy aren't at all clear.

Instead, Steinmo argues, American public policy is different because the country's extraordinarily fragmented governmental institutions, including the separation of powers and federalism, favor some interests and strategies and discourage others. In particular, his argument continues, fragmentation advantages those who seek to block proposals for ambitious

government programs, because they need only block them at one point in the structure, whereas advocates must jump all of the hurdles (e.g., House, Senate, president, Supreme Court). Steinmo (1994:126) characterizes the American system as a "polity replete with veto points," and speculates that American public policy would look very much more ambitious if Franklin Roosevelt had been prime minister in a parliamentary system in the 1930s instead of the American president. Another institutional feature, strong political parties, could conceivably overcome some of the governmental fragmentation, but America also set about to weaken parties. Then fragmentation, relatively low funding levels, and lack of comprehensive approaches strip government of its efficacy, so that people are reinforced in their view that government can't get anything right: "When American governments do act, they too often act badly." (Steinmo 1994:106)

Debates over national health insurance, according to the institutionalists, illustrate the point. Steinmo and Watts (1995), in trying to understand why the United States has not adopted national health insurance despite frequent attempts over a century, argue that Americans want it as much as residents of other countries. The explanation for the difference, in other words, does not lie in Americans' ideology or ideas. Their explanation turns on such institutional barriers to action as the separation of powers, bicameralism, and federalism. The founders designed institutions to pit factions against each other and stifle majorities, and the Progressives added to the bias toward inaction by weakening political parties. Because America has erected these barriers, according to Steinmo and Watts, powerful interest groups like organized medicine, small business lobbies, and insurance companies are in a much better position to block action than such groups are in countries with more mobilizable government institutions. In their view, demands from the public and the configuration of interest groups are quite similar across the industrialized world. What is different is the institutions. In the words of their article's title, "It's the institutions, stupid!"

A number of other writers fall, roughly speaking, into this "institutionalist" camp. Weaver and Rockman (1993) ask the question, "Do institutions matter?" While they trace in complicated detail the conditions under which and the ways in which institutions matter, their answer is basically, "yes". Weir (1992a) argues that the fluidity of institutions makes America more receptive to new ideas than other countries might be, but the weakness of political parties and bureaucracies results in an inability to construct coalitions that would unite politics, ideas, and administration. Heclo (1986:332) too is skeptical of the notion that American public policy is formed by a distinctive American culture that emphasizes individualism and antistatism. He notes that the United States has actually provided for a considerable edifice of income transfers, wealth redistributions, and social programs of various kinds, and concludes, "These are not the signs of a people seized by rugged individualism. There must be more to the story than the intellectual hammerhold of John Locke."

I personally don't find it necessary to choose between institutional and cultural explanations for cross-national differences in public policy. Indeed, the really powerful explanation stresses the *combination* of ideas and institutions. As White (1995b:373) puts it, "Is it 'the institutions, stupid?' or the preferences of those who run them? Phrased that way, we all know that both are implicated." Or to quote Smith (1995:387), "Institutions matter, but so do ideas, policy legacies, and key political interests."

To take the American case, the institutions didn't just spontaneously descend on the society and culture from afar. As I have argued earlier in this book, and as Steinmo and Watts acknowledge, the institutions arose from an ideological milieu. The founders held to an ideology that stressed the primacy of individual freedom and a profound distrust of government. Given that ideology, they designed the institutions to limit government and hamstring anybody's efforts to mobilize it to action. The weakening of political parties, as I argued above, reinforced limited government by weakening the major type of institution (parties) that would be capable of mobilizing for government action. So the institutions were intimately related to American ideology, and in no sense a kind of alternative explanation for subsequent events. Institutions and ideologies go together.

One problem with many critiques of cultural explanations for difference in public policies is that they measure culture by looking at contemporary popular preferences, as measured by survey research data. I noted earlier in this chapter that I wouldn't look to the mass public as my sole indicator of political culture. To expand on that point, political culture or systemic values are not the same as distributions of public preferences. Political culture includes, for instance, a set of central symbols to which advocates can appeal. Such symbols are not always reflected in survey questions designed to measure people's preferences about public policies. While the majority of Americans may prefer national health insurance when asked about it in a survey, for instance, they also respond to appeals to such distinctive symbols as government incompetence or tyranny, individual autonomy and supremacy, and limited government. Free and Cantril (1967:179) present convincing survey evidence that Americans express preferences for government programs providing education, health, old age benefits, jobs, and welfare, while at the same time they "cling to the traditional American ideology, which advocates the curbing of government power on social and domestic economic matters." Then elite-level opponents of proposals like national health insurance successfully appeal to those symbols, effectively sidestepping the distributions of preferences. No matter what type of national health care initiative Bill Clinton might have proposed, for instance, opponents were sure to attack it as "big government."

So we need to understand both elite and mass political ideologies. To understand political culture fully, we must know about the ideology of the founders, the ideas that motivated Progressives and other reformers, the

values of contemporary government officials and other activists, and the ways in which elite-level ideas are passed along to the mass public. Beyond that, we need to understand the power of culture, including the powerful symbols to which elites appeal, as opposed to distributions of preferences in the mass public. Finally, elections are a major institutional mechanism that ties culture to policy; as I noted above, elected politicians react to, play on, and shape the ideas and cultural symbols that resonate with their constituents.

It's also important to remind ourselves one more time that we're trying to understand America in relation to other industrialized countries, not America in relation to some sort of ideological ideal. Heclo is quite right to take note of the fact that Americans have indeed built a version of a social welfare state, as have all other industrialized democracies. But the question we're trying to answer in the pages of this book is why the American version, in policy after policy, is with few exceptions less ambitious than that of other countries. To that comparative question, it seems to me, the existence of distinctive American values constitutes at least a partial answer.

One way to phrase my resolution of this seeming conflict in the literature over institutional versus idea-based explanations is to say that early American ideas affected institutional design. Then, once they were in place, the institutions proved to be quite sticky and quite difficult to change, as institutions always are. Such subsequent events as reforms designed to weaken political parties and the failure of a viable democratic socialist party to emerge reinforced this early start. So the institutions took on a life of their own. I emphatically do not mean that a consensus on the tenets of an American ideology set us down this path and that the whole of American history has been a kind of automatic playing out of our beginnings. To the contrary, there has been a lot of change, and history is replete with struggles over our ideas and directions at every turn. But the power of these institutions, rooted as they were in the founders' ideas and reinforced since by the prevailing American ideology at the center of our politics, is also evident at every turn. I elaborate on this line of argument with a story of "path dependence" at the end of Chapter 4.

Ideas have affected institutions. And American institutions in turn have affected ideology. Steinmo (1993:7) says, "The structure of a polity's decision-making institutions profoundly affects how interest groups, politicians, and bureaucrats develop their policy preferences." As Americans became accustomed to arrangements like the separation of powers, bicameralism, and federalism, they came to expect rather little of government in comparison with citizens of other countries. After all, the founders had deliberately constructed these governmental institutions so that they wouldn't work very smoothly. As the founders intended, American government is unwieldy, inefficient, and limited. Little wonder that Americans were reinforced in the view that government doesn't work well.

Actually, a close reading of both the "idea-based" and the "institutional" writers reveals that each side in the scholarly dispute grants part of the case of the other. Both sides say that their chosen emphasis, be it institutions or ideas, isn't the whole explanation for public policies. King knows that American institutions are unwieldy and capable of capture by intransigent interest groups; Steinmo knows that values are important, and that institutions don't produce their effects in isolation from the ideological context in which they were designed and are embedded. As Steinmo (1993:201) puts it: "Neither institutions nor values nor economic interests for that matter by themselves provide adequate explanations for significant political outcomes over time; these variables interact with one another and, in so doing, change with time." Skocpol (1985:20) makes the same point, stressing a two-way relationship between state and society: "Studies of states alone are not to be substituted for concerns with classes or groups; nor are purely state-determinist arguments to be fashioned in the place of society-centered explanations."

Institutions and ideology, therefore, affect each other. American governmental institutions sprang from a belief in limited government. Their subsequent performance reinforced that very belief. And the powerful *interaction* between institutions and ideology has affected the pattern of American public policy right from the beginning down to the present day.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has described a prevailing American ideology, which emphasizes individualism and a belief in limited government. I have argued that this ideology has resulted in the patterns, described in Chapter 2, that distinguish the United States from other industrialized countries: fragmented governmental institutions, weaker political parties, lower taxes, a smaller public sector relative to the size of our economy, and less ambitious and far-reaching government programs in most public policy areas. We have also traced the seeming "exceptions" in the usual pattern of limited government to the workings of this prevailing American ideology. We attributed the distinctive American support for public education, for instance, to the value that Americans place on equality of opportunity.

Not all Americans subscribe to this ideology. Critics from both the left and the right assail its tenets. It clearly does not represent a sort of American consensus or hegemony. Despite a wide diversity of opinion, however, I believe it is still possible to think of a center of gravity in American politics, and in the politics of other countries. The major point is that, in the main, the center in American politics is considerably to the right of the center in the politics of other industrialized countries. Furthermore, despite swings of the pendulum over time from left to right and back again, and despite the growth of government over this century, the United States has

remained different from other countries over most of its history. So these ideas are both stable and distinctive in this comparative sense.

Again, I'm not justifying this distinctively American orientation toward government. Some Americans admire it and believe that there is a continuing American genius evident in the thinking of the founders. Other Americans disagree with this orientation, some arguing that there is too much suspicion of government and too much reluctance to use government for collective purposes, others claiming that government even in the United States is too big and intrusive. Readers of this book are entitled to their own opinions about whether the current situation is desirable, and if undesirable, in what direction and by how much we should change. I will add some of my own opinions in the last chapter. But my main purpose at this point in the book is more modest: to describe the state of affairs as it factually is, and to understand why America is so different from other industrialized countries.

So far, we have described the differences between the United States and other countries (Chapter 2) and have explained those differences in terms of a prevailing American ideology (Chapter 3). But *why* do Americans hold to those ideas about the proper role of government? We now turn to answers to that question.