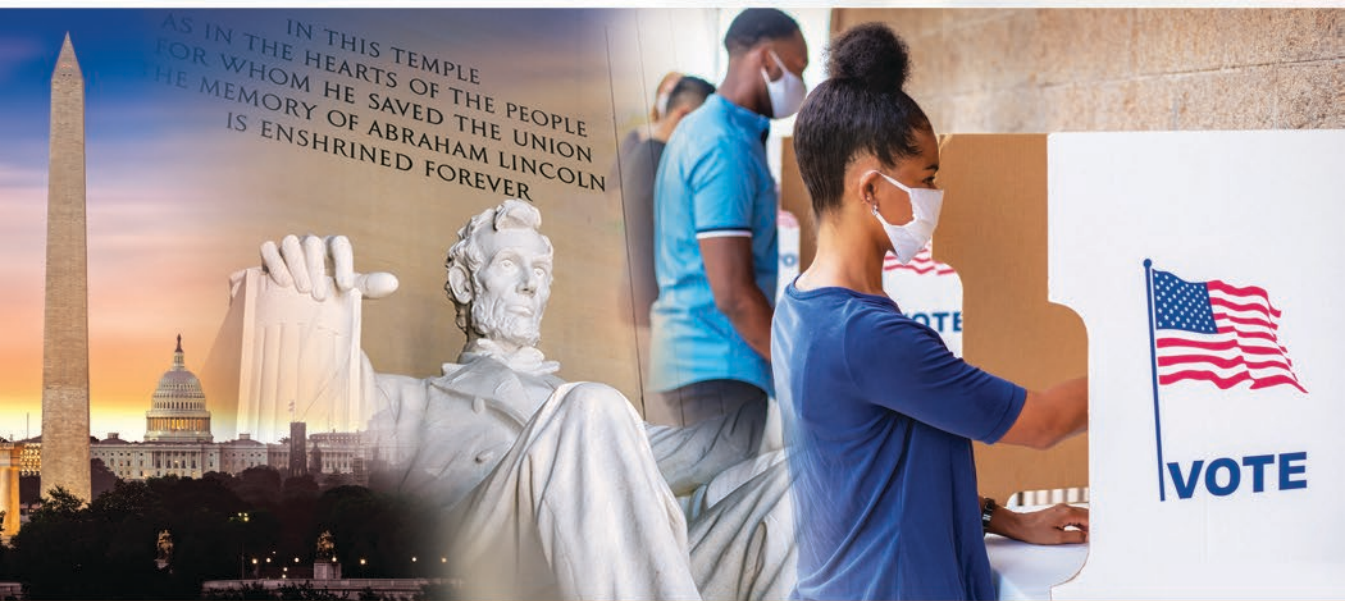


AMERICAN POLITICS AND SOCIETY



TENTH EDITION

DAVID McKAY

WILEY Blackwell

AMERICAN
POLITICS
AND
SOCIETY

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PREFACE TO THE TENTH EDITION

In the four years since the last edition of *American Politics and Society* the United States has been through one of the most turbulent periods in its history. By general academic consensus Donald Trump was the worst president in the modern era to hold the office. He left the country even more deeply divided than when he came into power with the Republican Party still largely loyal to the ex-president and to his divisive policies. He was, of course, the only president to be impeached twice and the only president who resolutely refused to accept the result of the election right up until he left office. His continued and vocal insistence that the 2020 election was ‘rigged’ was the trigger that incited a mob to launch a deadly assault on the Capitol building intent on stopping the official certification of the election. These dramatic events occurred in the midst of a raging pandemic that was to take more than half a million American lives and which had caused the greatest economic and social dislocation since the Great Depression. Trump’s response to this crisis was first to deny that it was happening and then to attack those Democratic politicians who he accused of unnecessarily locking down states and cities in order to control the spread of the virus.

It was in this febrile context that the 2020 contest was fought. In the event Joe Biden won the election for the Democrats by more than 7 million votes – although his victory in the Electoral College was much narrower. In addition, the Democrats narrowly held on to the House of Representatives and controlled the Senate only thanks to the casting vote held by Kamala Harris – the first woman to hold the office of Vice President. These election results demonstrate nicely the deep divisions that continue to haunt politics in America. Many of these reflect a yawning cultural divide that falls along race, age, gender, sexual preference, geographic and income lines. It is almost as if the US is characterized by the existence of two irreconcilable – and often warring – ‘tribes’. One is younger, more female, multicultural, urban, outward looking and concentrated on the coasts. The other is older, more male, whiter, somewhat poorer and concentrated in rural and small town southern, western and mid-western states. The resulting political and social polarization has been greatly aggravated by a Republican Party that has skewed dramatically to the right and whose most vocal supporters are often contemptuous of basic democratic norms – and even of the truth itself.

There is also an international dimension to the divide, with the Republicans favouring unilateralism in foreign policy and an ‘America first’ stance in international trade.

Democrats generally support multilateralism and international cooperation in such areas as climate change and arms control. On coming into office President Joe Biden promised to unify the country but the depth of the political divide is such that he faces a daunting task. He does, however, enjoy the advantage of unified government – if somewhat precariously. He is arguably also the most experienced person ever to have won the presidency having spent 36 years in the US Senate and eight as Vice President to Barack Obama.

These problems are the unifying theme of the 10th edition of *American Politics and Society*. Both Americans and non-Americans continue to have high expectations of what is still the world's most powerful country, but rarely are these expectations fulfilled. Instead, the system is increasingly characterized by adversarial politics, with one side constantly blaming the other for policy failures. As in earlier editions, these political conflicts are at all times both placed in careful institutional context and related to the broader historical environment – both domestic and international.

I first conceived of this book some forty years ago. Needless to say this 10th edition bears little resemblance to the first. However, I trust that it is as fresh and stimulating now as it was then. Justin Vaughan, Clelia Petracca and Charlie Hamlyn of Wiley-Blackwell provided typically professional advice and direction throughout. Finally, thanks to my wife Sherri Singleton and to my daughter Isla Singleton-McKay for their always positive and encouraging support.



CHAPTER 1

GOVERNING IN A POLARIZED SOCIETY

Outline

- The Chapters to Come
- Glossary

Hatred, anger, and violence can destroy us: the politics of polarization is dangerous.

RAHUL GANDHI, MEMBER OF THE INDIAN PARLIAMENT

Since the publication of the last edition of this book the United States has been through the four extraordinary years of the Trump presidency, marked first by a dramatic move to the right in almost all aspects of government policy, then a world pandemic that took more than 600 000 American lives and culminated in a violent assault on the Capitol building by Trump supporters intent on stopping the certification of what they falsely saw as a rigged election. These events occurred in the context of growing income and wealth inequality in the United States. Nobel laureate Paul Krugman has shown how this growing inequality is in stark contrast to the middle years of the twentieth century when America experienced what has been called a 'Great Compression' or income and wealth becoming more equally distributed. Since then, however, the rich have increased their share of income and wealth substantially, while the real incomes of poorer Americans have stagnated or even fallen. In addition, beginning in the 1980s and accelerating since the late 1990s, American politics has been increasingly characterized by ideological polarization on a wide range of non-economic issues ranging from race relations, immigration and the environment to moral issues such as abortion, gun rights, public order and sexual minorities' rights. Today, the Republicans are consistently on the right on these issues while the Democrats are (slightly less consistently) on the left. The upshot has been the emergence of a much more confrontational and abrasive style of politics centred on the proper role of government in society. Interestingly these differences do not easily align with the 'traditional' position of Democrats and Republicans on the role of government. In particular, categorizing the Republican Party as the 'hands off' party is difficult to reconcile with the extraordinary appeal of Donald Trump, who tried to implement a range of populist and authoritarian policies ranging from immigration to 'law and order' and the undemocratic control of elections. In addition he was no fiscal conservative and, along with many Congressional Republicans, seemed indifferent to the ballooning federal deficit. Meanwhile the Democrats remain active supporters of increased equality, big government in social policy, protecting the environment and many aspects of the economy and civil rights. There is, in fact, a deep paradox here, because for much of the history of the Republic, Americans have been suspicious of big government both in terms of its role in domestic affairs and in terms of its role in the wider world. Unlike the citizens of most West European states – and indeed of America's immediate neighbours, Mexico and Canada – Americans have always mistrusted the very *idea* of big government. Low taxes and limited public spending have been populist rallying cries since the beginning of the Republic. Today, however, the US has, in absolute terms, the largest government of any western country, which provides for a vast array of social and economic programmes as well as military forces and commitments with global reach.

At the inception of the Republic, no question aroused as much passion as did the proper scope of the federal government in society. What the Founding Fathers decided on was an institutional structure that required the assent of several diverse constituencies (those electing the House, Senate and president) before a bill was passed. The presidential power of veto provided an additional check on government, as did the institution of federalism, which served further to fragment government in the new republic. These institutional features were both a product of and reinforced by a public philosophy of limited government. From the very beginning Americans accepted that government was a necessary evil and that essential services such as law and order, sanitation and education should be provided by state and local rather than the federal government. The first 10 amendments to the Constitution (the Bill of Rights) provided citizens with legal protection from a potentially

intrusive central government. In particular, the First Amendment rights of freedom of speech, assembly and religion were designed to act as bulwarks against the power of the state. Americans also mistrusted standing armies. Instead they placed their faith in a people's militia or, later, in armies and navies that would be largely disbanded once a national emergency had passed.

What is remarkable about the ensuing 150 years of American history is just how powerful an influence this public philosophy was. For it was not until the 1930s and the 1940s that the federal government assumed a permanent and extensive role in social policy and defence. But many Americans remain deeply ambivalent about these new functions. Support for the particular benefits provided by a range of social programmes such as Medicare and social security is high, but, as the battles over federally mandated health care show, antipathy to the general notion of the federal government supporting those in need remains. Politicians preach the virtues of less government and lower taxes while promising to defend existing programmes. A similar tension exists in a range of conscience issues. Those who want to protect 'family values' are usually opponents of big government, yet the advance of their agenda would require government action to curb individual choice in such areas as abortion, stem cell research and the rights of sexual minorities. Politicians known to be tough on crime support an extension of the powers of government, including those of federal agencies such as the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). But these very same politicians often preach the virtues of limited government.

Nowhere is this tension more obvious than in foreign and defence policy. Public support for a major world role waxes and wanes according to the historical circumstances. It was high during and immediately after the Second World War, but fell dramatically in the aftermath of defeat in Vietnam. Even so, the need to balance the power of the Soviet Union required the Americans to retain large armed forces, including the nuclear deterrent, whether they liked it or not. With the demise of the old communist enemy most commentators expected the US to take on a different role aimed at least in part towards advancing a humanitarian agenda, as the interventions in Somalia, Bosnia and Kosovo showed. After 9/11 all this was to change. US interventions abroad became justified as part of the war on terrorism. By definition, this involved the sort of military role associated with big government and strong states. Following the difficulties involved in the interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan the tide turned once again, but, as far as those on the political right were concerned, not against a strong American role over such issues as nuclear weapons in Iran and North Korea, so much as against messy, expensive – and ultimately unwinnable – ground wars in distant lands fighting elusive enemies such as the Islamic State (ISIS). These sentiments were given a major fillip by Donald Trump who railed against the use of American troops abroad while remaining convinced that World problems could be solved through the striking of bilateral 'deals' with foreign dictators such as Kim Jong-un of North Korea.

Of course, the balance between limited government and an expanded federal role ebbs and flows as historical events such as recessions and wars change values and interests, but never has it taken on the form it has today, with both Democrats and Republicans deeply divided on the role of government and with Republicans in particular unable to reconcile their traditional antipathy to government with the need for decisive federal government intervention in such areas as immigration, health care, trade policy and tax reform.

For an introductory textbook, ideological conflict in the context of deep ambiguity on the proper role of government provides a useful theme. It helps international comparison.

In few countries has ideological polarization actually increased in recent years. On the contrary, in many comparable countries, including Japan, Germany and Spain, the mainstream political parties have been growing closer together, not further apart – although often at the expense of allowing extremist parties of the right and left to increase their voter appeal. Nor do these countries display the same level of uncertainty about the role of government or the ‘state’ as do Americans. Most citizens of France and Germany are perfectly happy to see the government provide for a wide range of services in welfare, transport, economic development and mobilizing to combat a global pandemic. Americans, by way of contrast, often seem to resent the role of the government in these areas while at the same time expecting the government to play a prominent role, especially during times of emergency or economic dislocation. *American Politics and Society* constantly makes comparisons of this sort, so educating students on the importance of a set of uniquely American beliefs and values.

These values are, of course, articulated in the context of the institutional structure of American politics. This structure has been the subject of much criticism in recent years. Critiques have been based in part on specific institutional arrangements, and in particular the separation of powers and the electoral system. With one party often controlling the presidency and another Congress, governing has, so the argument runs, become more difficult than in the past. Underpinning this critique is the simple fact that the American public has an unusually high degree of access to their political institutions – whether at the local, state or national levels. Access is facilitated not only by the sheer number and variety of democratically accountable political institutions, from local school boards through to the US Congress, but also by the fact that Americans take their First Amendment rights to express their views very seriously. Thus the many points of access for the expression of the democratic will are combined with a high expectation on the part of the public that their demands will be translated into policy.

The great paradox of the American arrangements is, of course, that open and free access to decision makers does *not* always translate into the satisfaction of public demands. Often the very institutional complexity of the system cancels out competing demands and leads to no change or incremental rather than radical change. It is this dynamic that explains many of the policy problems of recent years, such as continuing battles over reform of the health-care system and immigration. Institutional arrangements thus facilitate the airing of sometimes strident public demands while often limiting what governments can actually do. Given the deepening ideological divide which has accentuated the intensity of public demands, it is perhaps unsurprising that public frustration with political institutions has increased markedly over the last three decades.

Problems of governance are also aggravated by what many believe is an archaic electoral system that greatly over represents large but sparsely populated states and under represents densely populated areas. In addition, voter eligibility and the shape of Congressional and state constituencies remain in the hands of often conservative state legislatures thus disenfranchising or under representing large swathes of often poorer and ethnic minority voters.

These problems were more than amply illustrated during the 2016 and 2020 elections. In both the Democrats won the popular vote (in 2016 by more than 2 million votes and in 2020 by more than 7 million votes). But they lost the 2016 election in the Electoral College and only won the 2020 contest by a wafer thin margin of 44 000 votes in three battleground states (Arizona, Georgia and Wisconsin). Had Trump won these states a tie in the Electoral College would have been settled in Trump’s favour by the House of Representatives. So Biden’s 7 million vote margin of popular vote victory would have been nullified by the vagaries of

the Electoral College. Even so Trump refused to concede, claiming that the election in these and other key states was ‘rigged’. So convinced were his supporters of this totally false claim that they stormed the Capitol building in January 2021 hoping to stop official Congressional certification of the vote.

The consequent second impeachment of Donald Trump did little to deter his supporters either in their conviction that the election was illegitimate or in their faith in Donald Trump. Thus in the early 2020s the US remains bitterly divided over a range of issues but in particular over cultural and economic questions ranging from race, family values, gun control, taxation and spending to trade and the US role abroad.

Chapters to Come

The main purpose of this book is to lead the student through the main institutions of American federal government while at all times placing these institutions in a broader economic, social and comparative context.

Chapter 2 is devoted to a discussion of the role of beliefs and values in American politics and how these link in to the broader society and economy. As such it places a special emphasis on the remarkable way in which the tension in American political thought between the philosophy of limited government and high public expectations of the democratic process has been accommodated within a uniquely *American* ideology. Chapters 3–15 cover the main institutions and processes of American government, with each designed to provide basic information and to discuss the relevance of historical trends as well as the relevance of recent research findings in political science. Special attention is paid to the relationship between, on the one hand, the institutional structure of government and, on the other, the public’s expectations of the performance of politicians and political processes. Chapters 16–20 are designed to add substance and perspective to earlier chapters by examining the policy process in five currently crucial areas: the regulation of public morality in such areas as civil rights; social policy; economic policy; the environment; and foreign policy. Chapter 21 attempts to assess the performance of American government over the last decade, makes an audit of the political system and provokes students critically to evaluate the government in terms of democratic responsiveness and public accountability. Particular attention is paid to the rise of extremism in the Republican Party and whether or not we are entering a new era characterized by a threat to the basic rules whereby the country is governed.

The general orientation of this and earlier chapters reflects my conviction that the study of political institutions can be productive only when placed in the broader comparative and historical perspective. The alternative is to condemn the reader to an uninspired descriptive account, which is a fate I would not want to impose on any student of what is one of the most interesting subjects in social science.

Glossary

Great Depression The economic dislocation during the 1929–38 period



CHAPTER 2

BELIEFS, VALUES AND AMERICAN SOCIETY

Outline

- The Nature of American Beliefs and Values
- Values and American Society
- Controversy 2.1. Immigration: The Changing Nature of the Debate
- Controversy 2.2. How Classless is American Society?
- Controversy 2.3. Americans' Ambivalent View of Government and Taxes
- Social Structure
- Summary
- Questions for Discussion
- Glossary
- Notes
- Further Reading

It has been our fate as a nation, not to have ideologies but to be one.

– RICHARD HOFSTADTER

The American ideology can be described in five words: liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism and laissez faire.

– SEYMOUR MARTIN LIPSET

The Nature of American Beliefs and Values

One of the most enduring debates in social science concerns the relationship between the mass public's beliefs and values and political authority. Liberal scholars label these beliefs 'political culture', or 'a historical system of widespread, fundamental, behavioural, political values actually held by system members (the public)'.¹ Political culture therefore embraces the dominant pattern of beliefs and values that are acquired and modify and change as a result of a complex process of socialization and feedback from the political system. In other words, individual citizens acquire attitudes towards politics through learning from parents and from their environment (socialization), and these adapt and change as political authorities produce particular responses or policies over time (feedback). Political culture is made up of the sum of individual beliefs and values and, crucially, it is often *independent* of political authority. In some systems it may be incompatible with prevailing political institutions – as in Spain during the 1970s when an authoritarian regime was replaced by democracy, or in Weimar Germany before the rise of Hitler – in which case regime change occurs. In other systems, ethnic, religious, racial, cultural or linguistic divisions may be so great that no single political culture and institutional structure can accommodate these differences. In such cases civil war may ensue or the country may break up. The break-up of the former Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia could be explained in this way, as can events in modern-day Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan. In other cases again, the political culture supports and succours the political system. Liberal scholars invariably label the modern American system thus. Politics and political culture may change in the USA, but, notwithstanding the traumatic events of the 2016–2020 period, they tend to be mutually supportive. Regime change is extremely unlikely in such a situation.

Radical critics of the political culture perspective argue that public beliefs and values are imposed from above by those in positions of power. Beliefs constitute an *ideology*, therefore, whose function is to legitimate the prevailing system of political authority and economic organization. This radical perspective identifies the United States as a country where a dominant ideology imposed by powerful elites is particularly influential:

The dominant ideology is more powerful in the United States than in any other capitalist democracy. Most political debates in the United States take place within the framework of this ideology.... So powerful is the dominant ideology in this country that existing economic and political arrangements frequently appear not merely as the best possible arrangements but as the only possible ones.²

These two apparently incompatible positions are not as far apart as they may seem, for when American beliefs are examined, both liberals and radicals generally accept the importance of similar attitudes and values held by the mass of the population. Most scholars agree that the ideology is made up of liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, democracy, populism and the rule of law under a constitution.³ As the following summary shows, within this system of beliefs and values there are a number of tensions, and especially those involving conflicts between equality and inequality and between freedom and security. Often these tensions concern ambiguity over the proper role of government in American society.

Liberty

Survey research starting in the 1950s and continuing to this day found a high level of support among Americans in favour of *general* statements of free speech and opinion (for example, ‘People who hate our way of life should still have a chance to talk and be heard’), but much lower support for *specific* statements (for example, ‘A book that contains wrong political views cannot be a good book and does not deserve to be published’).⁴ Moreover, the level of support for specific freedoms was much higher among elites (politically influential people) than among the mass public. This disjunction between general and specific support is not exclusively American; citizens of many countries would answer positively to general statements advocating freedom. Clearly, freedom of expression is not an absolute value, and there have been times in American history when public tolerance of ‘un-American’ values has been very low. The anti-communist hysteria following the First and Second World Wars demonstrated just how limited freedom could be in the United States.⁵ And, until the mid-1960s, the attitude of white Americans in the South towards the African American population was the very opposite of libertarian, based as it was on systematic racial segregation and discrimination.

Since the 1960s, however, there has been evidence of some important changes. Racial tolerance has generally improved, and attitudes towards ‘un-American’ beliefs (communism, atheism) have become more liberal, as have attitudes towards sexual minorities. Note also, that increasingly libertarian attitudes towards people with racist views (see Figures 2.1a–d). In spite of these changes, antipathy to ‘non-American’ values, including today those associated with Islam, clearly remains, so it would be misleading to characterize the United States as a country where ‘freedom of expression’ or ‘liberty’ is assigned an inviolate status. This is a question we will return to in Chapter 13 when we discuss the implications of an increasingly intrusive security state for individual freedom.

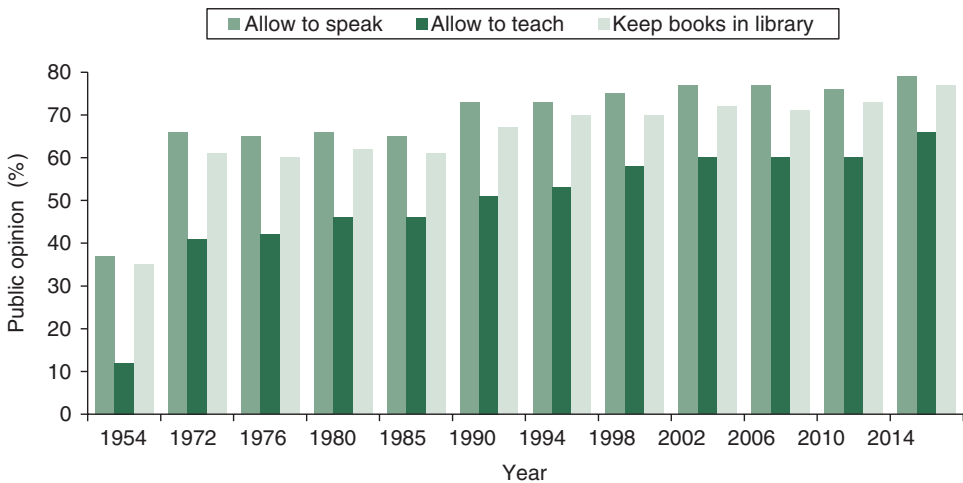


Figure 2.1a Public opinion on civil rights for atheists, 1954–2014.

Source: Computed from data in Harold W. Stanley and Richard G. Niemi, *Vital Statistics on American Politics, 2015–16* (Washington, DC: Sage, CQ Press, 2015), Table 3.11.

Note: No data available for first two columns of 1964.

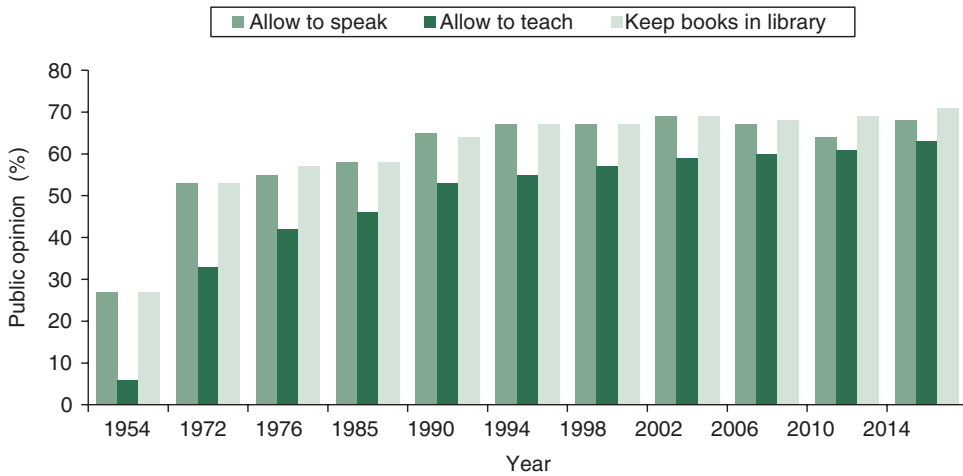


Figure 2.1b Public opinion on civil rights for communists, 1954–2014.

Source: Stanley and Niemi, *Vital Statistics on American Politics*, 2015–6, computed from Table 3.11.

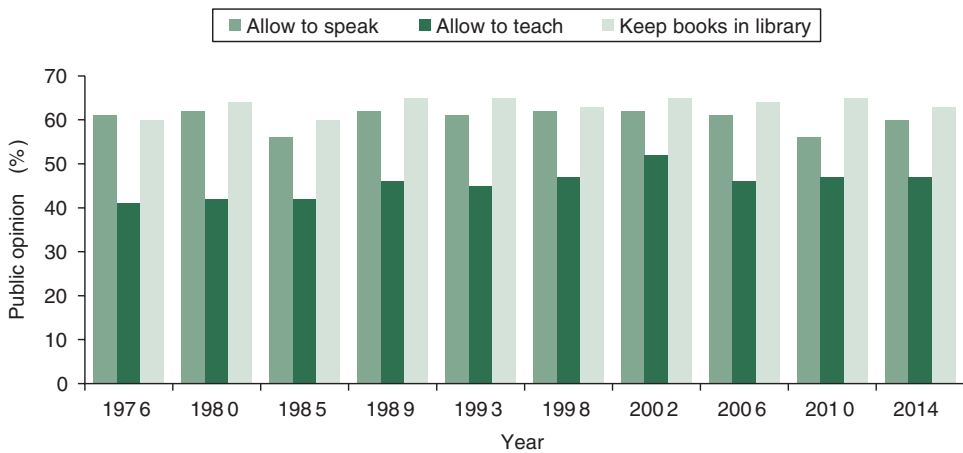


Figure 2.1c Public opinion on civil liberties for racists, 1978–2014.

Source: Stanley and Niemi, *Vital Statistics on American Politics*, 2015–6, computed from Table 3.11.

Three final qualifications need to be added to this conclusion, which should serve as a warning against simple over-generalizations in this area. First, as later chapters show, there was a quite dramatic advance in the legal protection of all individual rights, and especially freedom of expression, from the 1960s through to 2001, although some evidence exists of a return to anti-libertarian values since then. Not all these advances have been simply procedural. Objectively, American citizens, newspapers and other media now enjoy much more freedom than they used to. As this development can cause governments and officials serious difficulty and embarrassment, it seems to contradict claims that Americans are being manipulated by dominant elites.