



INDEPENDENCE

Americans value independence and self-determination, placing importance on the role of the individual in shaping his or her own identity and destiny through one's choices, abilities, and efforts. Independence fosters one's ability to be self-reliant and self-sufficient, to be able to do what is necessary to create a fulfilling life for oneself and one's family.

[Independence, also called freedom or liberty, also represents the limited intervention and control of the government on personal lives. This notion of independence comes directly from the Declaration of Independence.](#)

For Americans, independence is a prime motivator for self-determination, reflected in the bravery of the early colonists and those who marched westward to create new lives, homes, and communities. Various freedoms are also guaranteed in the Bill of Rights, the first ten amendments to the Constitution. The First Amendment guarantees the freedoms of religion, speech, assembly, and the press. The Fourth Amendment prevents “unreasonable searches and seizures,” that is, the government cannot, without reason, enter your home or seize financial or computer records.

Millions of immigrants have come to “the Land of Opportunity” to help their families and to flee war, persecution, poverty, and social obligations and restrictions. Many others come because they want to pursue their own American Dream—whether that is education, starting a business, or leading their own self-created lifestyle.

Independent choice is visible in many aspects of American life. At home, American parents teach their children self-sufficiency by encouraging them to feed and dress themselves from a very early age. In the workplace, employees must forge their own career paths and not depend on a paternalistic sponsor who will pave the way.

In public life, citizens are free to vote for their candidates of choice and to voice their pleasure or disagreement to their elected officials or to participate in mass demonstrations.

In their private lives, Americans are free to live where they wish, socialize with whom they select, and practice their chosen religion. In summary, this notion of independence creates the opportunities for people to determine their own lifestyles free from government control and social conventions.



EQUALITY

The belief that all humans are created equal and are equal in value, without regard to their gender, race, ethnicity, religion, age, disability, or sexual orientation, has influenced national political movements and local community action groups. “Treat others as you would like to be treated” and “Love your neighbor as yourself” are proverbs that encourage people to deal with others in a fair and kind manner.

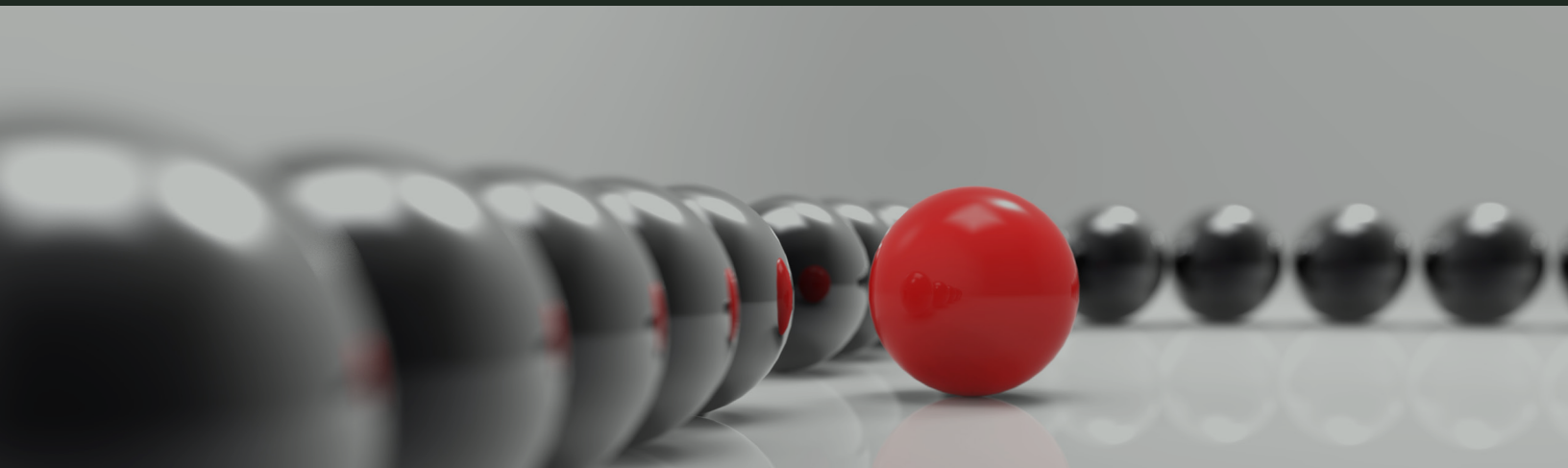
In public life, this value is embodied by the commitment to providing and enforcing the equality of opportunity; access to goods and services; and equal rights, representation, and protection under the law. In private interactions, average citizens do not look to the upper classes to determine societal norms but rather determine their own guidelines. While Americans show respect to their hierarchical superiors, they do not give up their ability to express their opinions or assert their rights.

This notion of egalitarianism also originates from Thomas Jefferson’s quote in the Declaration of Independence, stating “all men are created equal.” Most historians believe that Jefferson, influenced by the European Enlightenment, meant “humanity” when he wrote this, but others believe that he did mean to exclude women, children, and slaves. Jefferson himself owned slaves, as did many of the Founding Fathers. Two centuries later, the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and others, worked to end racial segregation and discrimination against African Americans.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 legislated three things: it banned discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin in employment practices; it ended unequal application of voter registration requirements; and it rendered illegal racial segregation in schools, at the workplace, and in public accommodations.

The accomplishments of civil rights leaders paved the way for women, people with disabilities, and the LGBT community to also fight for equal rights and representation in subsequent decades. While certainly perfect social, economic, educational, and legal equality doesn’t exist in the United States, or in any other country, the ideal of equality still resonates strongly with most Americans and exerts a strong pull for immigrants to come to the United States. In the last 50 years, many disadvantaged groups have made strides. In general terms, African Americans have made significant economic and educational gains. There are more women in elected office and in upper management than ever before. Hispanics are coalescing to have a greater political voice and to push for immigration reform.

In legal terms, the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990 aimed to prevent discrimination and guarantee access and accommodation for those with disabilities. In June 2015 the Supreme Court allowed and protected same-sex marriage nationwide. Even with these changes, most Americans would agree there is much room for improvement in creating a more egalitarian society.



INDIVIDUALISM

Individualism, or individual will, means each person is free to do what they want and need, as long as it doesn't interfere with the rights of others. Competition is inherent in individualism as people strive to be recognized and rewarded.

Americans also believe that they have a fair degree of control over their lives; that their actions can change or influence their circumstances. They value privacy and determine with whom they will share the intimate details of their lives.

Individual Americans might not see themselves as representative of American culture, but rather perceive themselves as people with unique behaviors, values, and beliefs.

The social value of individualism was described and promoted by the 17th century British Enlightenment philosopher John Locke, who greatly influenced the work of the Founding Fathers, and by John Stuart Mill, the 19th century British philosopher, who influenced the flourishing of the new nation. These thinkers advocated the individual pursuit of work and satisfaction as well as the limitation of government to intervene in individuals' lives. This, they assumed, would be accompanied by a desire to contribute to the common and public good.

American individualistic culture allows and encourages people to create their own lifestyle that they hope will lead to happiness and accomplishments. Their self-expression is not obligated to conform to societal norms or follow in their parents' footsteps. Students are mostly graded for their individual work. Entertainment figures and sports icons are celebrated for their unique contributions. American entrepreneurs have generated many innovations and jobs by their vision and diligence.

Social critics, on the other hand, point out that our focus on "me" has eroded the "we" concept needed for community cohesion. Research from the 2000 book "Bowling Alone" by Robert D. Putnam showed that Americans belong to fewer organizations such as unions, Boy and Girl Scouts, and Rotary Clubs, and socialize less frequently with family, friends, and neighbors than they had in the past. As such, they are becoming lonelier and more isolated, much to the deterioration of the social fabric of communities.



DEMOCRACY

The United States enjoys a democratic form of government where citizens elect and change their political leaders, whom they expect will represent them and answer to their will. At the basic level, popular opinion decrees that a democratic nation must have free and fair elections, a system of checks and balances, rule by the majority, and protection of minorities.

American democracy grew from ancient Greek traditions, the Bible, and ancient Israel as well as British forms of government. John Locke, the British philosopher, rejected the idea that kings had a divine right to rule but rather believed that people are the source of power. Thomas Jefferson drew heavily from Locke's writings.

The U.S. Constitution, adopted in 1788, created an outline for a modern democracy. The Bill of Rights, containing the first ten amendments to the Constitution and adopted in 1791, describes the limits on government power and grants certain rights to the states and to individuals.

Democratic traditions are carried out by individual citizens as well as by the federal government. For all federal and most state elections, a voter must be a U.S. citizen, 18 years of age, and a resident of the locality where they will vote. Registration to vote is generally an easy process, although for the 2012 presidential election and in subsequent elections, certain restrictions have been put on voter registration.

As a model of democracy, the U.S. government, often through international non-governmental organizations, is frequently called upon to monitor foreign elections with the intent of observing if the election adheres to international standards and to report any fraud. The ideals of democracy can extend to the workplace or to gatherings of friends; when a group cannot decide what to do, someone will often say, "Let's take a vote. Majority wins." Overall, Americans believe that democratic principles help foster fair government and strong, open market economies at home, and the U.S. government strives to promote democracy around the world.



NATIONALISM

Nationalism and patriotism are closely linked concepts and imply devotion to one's country, its values, and assertion of political interests. A study of polls from 2014 and 2015* found that 65% of Americans consider themselves patriotic and 83% believe the United States is the best country to live in.

American nationalism originated with the vision of "a city upon a hill" as stated by John Winthrop, a British Puritan colonist, in 1630, and furthered by Alexis de Tocqueville, a French writer, in 1835, who deemed America "exceptional" by the land itself and the country's Puritanical and commercial origins.

Many homeowners will display an American flag on national holidays, and after the terrorist attacks of 9/11/2001, many more flags were displayed in public venues.

Americans express their pride in their country in various ways. School children will recite the Pledge of Allegiance and attendees to major sporting events will sing the National Anthem.

More deeply than this, the U.S. government feels a special responsibility to be a force for good in the world, being a model of democracy for other nations, and offering humanitarian and military assistance in times of need. For these actions, the United States is sometimes praised ("The U.S. stepped in to help.") and sometimes criticized ("The U.S. is meddling again in international affairs.").

When the United States intervenes internationally, at times there is a legal responsibility, due to treaties such as NATO, and in other cases there is a moral obligation, as in the case of an earthquake. In these diverse circumstances, the United States exercises its power for the protection of human and civil rights.

Due to America's geographic isolation and global influence, the average American is not well informed about international current events except those which may be shown in newspaper headlines and on the nightly television news. Without this comparative view, and with a more inward focus on their personal lives, most Americans do not feel the necessity to closely follow international developments.

*"AEI Public Opinion Study: Polls on Patriotism"



MERITOCRACY

Inherent within the American Dream is an affirmation of meritocracy, which allows for upward socioeconomic mobility based on one's efforts, accomplishments, and talents, and not through seniority, inherited names, titles or property, or unethical means such as bribery. Americans closely identify themselves with the jobs they have, and it's common to ask someone they have just met, "What do you do?" or "Where do you work?"

The geographically vast and resource rich country, with an abundant, diverse, and industrious population, was and still is fertile ground for new possibilities. "The Land of Opportunity" is a powerful pull for millions of immigrants to come and make their mark. The habits of a strong work ethic, punctuality, efficiency, and practicality also contribute to personal and professional success.

Abraham Lincoln, the 16th president, was born of farmers who moved frequently, and he was largely self-educated. He lost eight elections, twice failed in business, saw two sons die, and suffered a nervous breakdown. Despite these modest beginnings and severe setbacks, through perseverance, dedication, and talent, Lincoln became one of the most revered presidents in U.S. history, leading the nation through the Civil War and the abolition of slavery.

Americans love stories of "rags to riches" success and about people who "pulled themselves up by their bootstraps," improving their situation by their own hard work. Throughout American history there have been many individuals who became successful after struggling through difficult times.

A more modern example is the talk-show host, media proprietor, actress, and philanthropist Oprah Winfrey. Born into poverty to a single teenage mother, Oprah was shuttled among relatives and was abused. As a teen, she became a successful local radio host and soon moved to television. Her long-running talk show The Oprah Winfrey Show made her the only African American female billionaire. President Barack Obama gave her the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian award, in 2013. The stories of these towering figures, as well as thousands of others, illustrate that the values of hard work and persistence can result in the construction of a successful and satisfying life.



DIRECTNESS

In communication and actions, most Americans believe that a straightforward and direct approach is the best way to ensure that a message is sent and received correctly. American professionals appreciate honesty and authenticity as a means to productivity and efficiency. Meaning is carried mostly by the words and much less so by contextual clues such as relative hierarchical position of the speaker and listener and where the communication takes place. A direct communicator doesn't intend to be rude, but rather desires clarity and speed. Conversely, Americans may consider indirect or subtler forms of communication to be incomplete, dishonest, or insincere.

Several proverbs illustrate how Americans value direct communication: "Say what you mean, and mean what you say;" "Tell it like it is;" and "Honesty is the best policy." Roots of this communication style may spring from a task orientation, where the primary purpose of communication is to identify the goal and all the attending elements needed to attain that goal. Relationships are built in the process. Cultures with a relationship orientation prefer to first establish trust with their counterparts, and then through that solid relationship carry out their tasks.

Americans prefer that people "get to the point" and "don't beat around the bush" in meetings and negotiations. They will offer both positive and constructive feedback with the intention of improving the process or product.

Many Americans will not necessarily shy away from conflict if they feel it will help them reach their objectives, even if it creates disharmony.

They will also use body language congruent with direct communication: fairly consistent eye contact to acknowledge others and to infer self-confidence, and a brief, firm handshake. Americans don't intend to offend their discussion partners, and they have moderate concern for "saving face" or not embarrassing their counterparts. In the end, they hope that this transparency will generate expedient and positive results.



INNOVATION

Innovation can be defined as a process to generate new ideas, processes, and products that add value, such as better quality or efficiency, to people or organizations. Americans' positive association with change and progress exemplifies a "future orientation," looking ahead for better things to come. While they show a healthy regard for tradition, Americans are even more attracted to the "new and improved" label being affixed to their bodies (physical fitness), laundry detergents ("removes stubborn stains"), cars ("more fuel efficient"), and computer software (Update 14.10.5). Americans confer respect on the scientists and engineers who create sophisticated innovations as well as on the average person who finds a more efficient way to accomplish everyday tasks.

From the early British colonists to the immigrant entrepreneurs of today, Americans have been obsessed with making things better and easier. In less than two-and-a-half centuries, the United States has become a beacon of innovation and a model for change.

The American preferences for a short-term focus, a fast pace, convenience, and efficiency fuel the push for innovation. "Necessity is the mother of invention" and "making something out of nothing" are proverbs that inspire the American innovator. Famous early inventors such as Eli Whitney, Thomas Edison, Wilbur and Orville Wright, Madame C.J. Walker, and Alexander Graham Bell are revered as American heroes.

Today, the American public education system steers away from rote learning and tries to emphasize creativity and critical thinking. Business and industry reward their best producers with financial incentives and promotions. Recent government initiatives for stronger educational systems, investment in research and technology, and improvements to infrastructure such as roads and internet access will serve to stimulate economic growth and prosperity. The government protects intellectual property rights and strictly enforces patents, copyrights, and trademarks.

Over time, approximately fifty percent of patents applied for and granted have come from American innovators. In the history of the Nobel Prize, about forty percent of the winners have been based in the United States. Modern innovators such as Bill and Melinda Gates, Dr. Paul Farmer, Patricia Bath, Mark Zuckerberg, Lonnie G. Johnson, and Temple Grandin are credited with improving lives and industry. With increasing access to technology and financing, American innovators are certain to continue generating improvements in the foreseeable future.



CONSUMERISM

Americans love to shop. Acquiring the main accouterments of the American Dream is the main target, including a home and a car, followed by electronics. Downtown areas and shopping malls are filled with people browsing and walking away with their purchases. This consumption fuels the American economy. The wide range of consumables, from clothing to toys and gourmet coffee to home décor, offers infinite variety. The ease of obtaining credit also fuels the shopping frenzy.

Shopping fulfills many needs, from putting food on the table for family meals to a sense of "instant gratification" from an impulse purchase to a form of recreation. From the country store to the Pony Express to Sears catalogues to major department stores and warehouse outlets, and now to online shopping, consumers have an ever expanding accessibility to goods.

Thrift stores, flea markets, and garage sales offer bargains to the savvy consumer, and online marketplaces such as eBay, craigslist, and Freecycle create a local community of sellers and recyclers.

The economic downturn of 2007-2008 caused severe economic stress for millions of families. Dubious actions by Wall Street, a housing crisis, job losses, and global repercussions forced consumers to drastically change their spending habits by delaying purchases or resorting to less expensive options. Research shows that about half of consumers use either paper or digital coupons offering discounts.

However, certain products, such as Apple's iPhones, whose retail releases generate long waiting lines, seem immune to spending limitations. The economic recovery has been slow but steady, reducing consumers' anxiety and allowing them to return to their former habits.



INFORMALITY

American informality is closely related to egalitarianism. In cultures with a relatively flat (not hierarchical) structure, there is less demonstration of deferential behavior and language overtly recognizing the relative positions of the people interacting. In English, there is only one word for “you” (and not two, one for an “informal” you for a sibling or friend, and one for a “formal” you for a supervisor or elder).

Americans use relatively few titles in everyday interactions, reserving them for medical and religious professionals, military and police officers, and university professors. They are often quick to move from Mr. Jones and Ms. Garcia to using Charles and Cristina after a brief acquaintance. “Sir” and “Ma’am” are used mostly with people whose names are unknown or by service providers.

Fashion trends have greatly influenced American informality. In the mid-1960s the Hawaiian garment industry wanted to sell more Aloha or Hawaiian shirts appropriate for men to wear to work. In the early 1990s, this casual trend hopped to the mainland when cash-strapped companies introduced “Casual Friday” as a non-monetary perk for employees.

Levi's, of blue jeans fame, had acquired Dockers, the manufacturer of khaki pants, and promoted them as compromise between suits and jeans. As more women entered the workforce in the 1980s, their dress codes relaxed a bit as women began to feel they didn't have to dress like men to succeed and be taken seriously. In Silicon Valley today, tech workers dress very casually and are prized for their innovations more than their fashion sense. However, many companies have had to define formal dress codes to determine a common understanding of “business casual” and avoid inappropriate outfits.

Casual fashion may have been one catalyst for current casual behavior. Now waiters may approach an elderly couple with, “What can I get for you guys?” and a student asking a professor for help may start her email with, “Hey, I have a question for you.”

Americans are rather relaxed in standing and seating posture and in table manners.

Visitors to a friend's home will choose where to sit and may even help themselves to a soda from the fridge. Family pets are often free to roam the house and take a nap on the furniture. These behaviors are not meant to offend or show disrespect, but are rather a lack of adherence to formal protocols.



EFFICIENT USE OF TIME

Americans, in relation to other cultures, are obsessed with time. Time is closely controlled and measured and should be “planned” and “used wisely.” “Time is money” is an admonition to make every second count. If you don’t use time wisely, losses could occur. Time in the U.S. is “monochronic” because it is fixed, specific, and scarce. There is a preference for communicating and executing tasks in a linear and sequential fashion. At the opposite end of the spectrum, in many other countries, is “polychronic” time, where time is fluid, estimated, and abundant. Time and tasks may flow in multiple directions simultaneously.

In the United States, the Industrial Revolution in the mid-19th century improved transportation and electricity and created factories and mechanization.

These new ways of working generated huge gains in productivity but also necessitated the greater control of time for scheduling personnel, monitoring factory operations, delivering supplies, and distributing finished goods. Whereas before people worked on their own farms or in their small shops, now they had to be coordinated to work in large numbers and in specified shifts. Determining and adhering to schedules is still highly valued in professional life. This focus on time has allowed American business and industry to become highly productive, further reinforces the orientation to the future, and helps ensure customer satisfaction.

As a counterpoint, in the last decade Americans have worked more hours and taken fewer vacations, due to increased workload and fear of not appearing dedicated enough to their jobs in a tight job market. This is affecting the quality of work-life balance and causing many workers to reevaluate their professional and financial goals. In either case, whether tied to the clock or trying to free oneself from its control, time exerts a strong influence on Americans’ personal and work lives.

Time, and its cousins efficiency and speed, have generated an American fascination with and dependence on services such as fast food, express package delivery, product expiration dates, and speed dating. Email and cellphones offer features for auto-fill-in and speed dialing. Digital (not analog) clocks and watches proclaim ever-more precise declarations of the hour.
