American Temperament
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The celebration of Independence Day confronts us with a persistent anomaly: Americans may be among the most patriotic people in the world, but polls and other historical evidence reveal that majorities of patriotic Americans regularly reject many fundamental values usually associated with the country.

For example, portions of the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, and some other constitutionally guaranteed rights have all failed to gain majority support in various polls and surveys.

Nor do Americans know a great deal about the country they love. Multiple studies have revealed surprising public ignorance of the basic forms and processes of American government. It seems clear that the curiosity of most Americans about their government is easily satisfied.

Instances of low knowledge levels and contradictory opinions about government and politics are neither isolated nor rare. What Americans know about their country is often incomplete, nebulous, or inchoate; and what they believe about their country is not always consistent, coherent, or rational. Indeed, it can be argued that discrepant and antagonistic beliefs and attitudes pervade public opinion about American government and politics. They are part and parcel of the American temperament—that characteristic mode of thinking, feeling, and behaving in political life singular to the American people. As we observe Independence Day, it is worth reflecting on five prominent examples of the mismatch between what Americans know and what they believe about their country, their government, and their politics.

1. **Symbolic Conservatism and Operational Liberalism.** Americans believe they want less government, lower taxes, and reduced spending—yet they reject or resist most specific proposals to reduce government or entitlement programs. In the phrase of one writer, Americans are "symbolic conservatives and operational liberals." They respond to the general proposition that government is too big and taxes are too high; yet oppose strong policies that would end popular entitlement programs. One consequence of this ideological schizophrenia is divided government, which, at its deepest levels, reflects Americans' inconsistent views about the purpose of government.

2. **Love-Hate Relationship with Government.** Public confidence in American representative institutions is often weak or vacillating; legislative bodies, courts, and other governmental institutions rate low on trust and on job performance. Yet individual members of these institutions typically enjoy high support and approval. Congress is certainly the best exemplar of this contradiction. As an institution, it regularly draws forth the wrath and venom of large majorities of Americans. But the dislike of the institution does not extend to its members. On the contrary, individual members often enjoy great personal popularity and support—support that is dramatically expressed in incumbent re-election rates exceeding 95 percent. This dissonance between Congress, the institution, and its members illustrates the deep ambivalence Americans often exhibit about their government and what it does.

3. **Public Opinion versus Public Policy.** Public opinion polls get more attention in America than in any other country in the world; however, public opinion matters only marginally and inconsistently in terms of its influence on public policy. The near-obsession with collecting and studying public opinion obscures the
almost equally strong aversion to actually acting on it. Americans seem to want to know more and more about what they think, but to do less and less about it. Several contemporary public policy issues demonstrate the truth of this point, including gun control, congressional term limits, tax reform, the balanced budget amendment, and prayer in public schools. All of these policies and others are supported lopsidedly by public opinion, but consistently have failed or are minimally addressed in many legislatures and in Congress.

4. **Ideas without Ideology.** Ideas today continue to have a profound effect on contemporary politics, and ideas have mattered enormously throughout American political history. Indeed, the nation was founded on an idea, and ideas and conflict over them have occurred throughout American history. Yet ideology itself, understood as a consistent dogma of political beliefs and values, matters little to most Americans and ideological consciousness is weak and erratic within the electorate. Most Americans eschew any consistent ideological thinking at all. The disjunction between ideas and ideology has produced a uniquely American blend of political schizophrenia, with its politics and public policy being driven by ideas but devoid of ideology.

5. **A Group of Individuals.** Americans revere individualism above all other political ideals, and individualism rather than collectivism is arguably the preeminent value in the American political culture; in fact, the nation was founded in part on a deep commitment to individualism and its pursuit. But individuals have little real power in the American polity. Instead, it is interest groups and not individuals that are the elemental forces in American politics. It is groups collectively not individuals who are organized to advocate policy. It is groups collectively not individuals who coalesce around policy consensus. And it is groups collectively not individuals that arbitrate public policy conflicts. When Americans pursue the value of individualism they must do it mainly in groups.

What do these apparent contradictions and inconsistencies tell us about ourselves as we toast the country’s birthday? At one level, this pattern of ignorance about how government works suggests a serious disconnect between the governed and the government—a polity seriously out of touch with its own ideals and values. And there is much to consider in this view of the world. But a more sanguine interpretation is also possible. The enigmatic attitudes and ungrounded beliefs we observe among Americans can also serve to sharpen appreciation for the subtle genius of the American political temperament. Warts notwithstanding, the country’s political temperament has provided a labile framework to forge the necessary compromises that make American democracy unique. It isn’t always consistent or always coherent or always pretty to watch. But it works most of the time not just in spite of its shortcomings. It also works because of them.

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