

# WHAT ARE THE BASIC AMERICAN VALUES AND BELIEFS?

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Sociologist Robin Williams attempted to offer a list of basic values in the United States: Achievement, efficiency, material comfort, nationalism, equality and the supremacy of science and reason, over faith. There are certain ideals and values, rooted in the country's history, which many Americans share. Here are: FREEDOM, INDIVIDUALISM, PRAGMATISM, VOLUNTEERISM, MOBILITY, PATRIOTISM, PROGRESS, AMERICAN DREAM.

- 1. FREEDOM** – Americans commonly regard their society as the freest and best in the world. Americans' understanding of freedom is shaped by the Founding Fathers' belief that all people are equal and that the role of the government is to protect each person's basic "inalienable" rights. The U.S. Constitution's Bill of Rights assures individual rights, including provisions for freedom of speech, press and religion. No one single church dominates or controls in the US, there is a religious diversity.
- 2. INDIVIDUALISM** – Americans' notion of freedom focuses on the individual, and individualism has strong philosophical roots in America. Thomas Jefferson believed that a free individual's identity should be held sacred and that his or her dignity and integrity should not be violated. America's 19th c. Transcendentalists philosophers (Emerson, Thoreau, Fuller) argued for more individual self-reliance. Encouraged individuals to trust in themselves and their own consciences and to revolt against routine and habitual paths of conduct. Early 20th c. Pragmatists (James, Dewey) insisted upon the individual's ability to control his or her fate. Individualism, understood not only as self-reliance but also as economic self-sufficiency, has been a central theme in American history (frontiers heroes who braved the wilderness alone, farmers whose success depended on their ability to confront the hardships of land and resourcefulness, the celebration of the small businessman who became a financial success on his own; individual proprietorship in business is still extolled as the ideal). + "Self-made man" like B.Franklin.
- 3. IDEALIZING WHAT IS PRACTICAL** - Many historians believe that most of the beliefs and values which are characteristically American emerged within the context of the frontier experience. Survival in the wilderness was best achieved to robust individualists. Survival experiences also explain the American tendency to idealize whatever is practical. In America what works is what counts. Inventiveness was necessary for survival. This "can-do" spirit is something Americans are proud of today. They like to think they are natural-born do-it-yourselfers (a variety of self-help books).

4. **VOLUNTEERISM** – means people helping people through privately initiated, rather than government-sponsored, agencies. Volunteers are highly motivated people, workers who organize themselves and others to solve a particular community problem or meet an immediate social need, rather than waiting for someone else – usually the gov- to do it. The willingness to participate in such groups is so widespread that six out of ten Americans are members of a volunteer organization. Volunteerism reflects Americans’ optimistic pride in their ability to work out practical solutions themselves. Americans like to form associations of different kind.
  
5. **MOBILITY** – Tocqueville in “Democracy in America” wrote: In the United States a man builds a house to spend his latter years in it, and he sells it before the roof is on: he plants a garden, and lets it just as the trees are coming into bearing: he brings a field into tillage, and leaves other men to gather the crops: he embraces a profession and gives it up: he settles in a place which he soon afterwards leaves, to carry his changeable longings elsewhere.” American habit. As a nation of immigrants, Americans have shared from the beginning the assumption that the practical solution to a problem is to move elsewhere and make a fresh start. Mobility in America is not a sign of aimlessness but optimism (hoping to secure a better job or enjoy a warmer climate: after the WWII inner migration from the Frost Belt to the Sun Belt). Moving about from place to place is such a common and accepted practice that most Americans take it for granted that they may live in four or five cities during their lifetime. Americans hate to feel that buying a house might immobilize them forever.
  
6. **PATRIOTISM** - Americans develop relatively little attachment to place (mobility). In this century, national pride has become generally stronger than regional pride. The prevalence of patriotic symbols: flags fly in suburban neighborhoods, bumper stickers announce “I’m proud to be American”, the national anthem is played at every sporting event. National holidays such as Thanksgiving and Independence Day intensify the sense of national identity. American patriotism is concentrated upon the particular historic event of the nation’s creation as a new start and upon the idea of freedom which inspired the nation’s beginnings.
  
7. **PROGRESS** - directly associated with the idea of freedom is the ideal of progress. The nation’s progress has been measured by the taming of the frontier and industrial expansion. The desire to progress by making use of opportunities is important to Americans. In this immigrant society, progress is personally measured as family progress over generations. Many Americans can boast that with each succeeding generation since their first ancestors arrived, the family’s status has improved. The classic American family saga is all about progress. The great-grandparents, arriving from the Old World with nothing but the clothes on their backs, work hard and suffer poverty and alienation so that they can provide a good education for their children. The second generation,

motivated by the same vision of the future and willingness to work hard and make sacrifices, pass these values to their children. The attainment of the vision of one's grandparents is part of the American Dream.

**8. AMERICAN DREAM** – J.T.Adams in *The Epic of America* expressed the term as “the dream of a land in which life should be better, richer, and fuller for every man with opportunities for each according to his abilities and achievement”. It teaches Americans to believe that contentment can be reached through the virtues of thrift, hard work, family loyalty, and faith in free enterprise system. History: American Dream is not open to all. Segregation and discrimination are effective tools which have barred minorities from equal opportunities in all spheres. American Dream is based on people's ability, provided they use enough effort, to reach any goal.

- Values are subject to change as a society encounters distinctive pressures and strains. That is why now Americans place a high value on “national security” because of the external attacks, insecurity. / The 1980s saw a return to conservative family values and morals, as well as a renewal of national pride
- Values may not always be upheld. The Bill of Rights, which guaranteed the freedoms of speech, the press, and religion, is one important expression of American national values. Yet even this historic document cannot be seen as defining a set of values that all Americans share. Beginning with Samuel Stouffer in the 1950s, sociologists have asked people whether these First Amendments rights should be extended to certain groups. While the right to speak or publish seems clearly established in the Bill of Rights, many Americans balk when asked if such privileges should be extended to atheists, communists, and a variety of others. Apart from this, the notion that America offers freedom for all has not always correspond to reality: the inconsistency of black slavery in a society supposedly dedicated to freedom and equality plagued the nation from the very beginning. Reality continues to demonstrate that some social groups and individuals are not as free as others. Because of religious, racial, sex, or age discrimination some Americans have not enjoyed the same rights and opportunities as others.

IS AMERICA A CLASSLESS SOCIETY? DESCRIBE THE SOCIAL STRATIFICATION IN THE US. CLASS – a term used by Max Weber to refer to persons who share a similar level of wealth and income.

**STRATIFICATION** – a structured ranking of entire groups of people that perpetuates unequal economic rewards and power in a society.

**SOCIAL INEQUALITY** – describes a condition in which members of a society have unequal amounts of wealth, prestige or power. American ideology highlights equality but in the US there is the most unequal distribution of income or wealth: The top fifth of the population (upper class) receives just over 40% of the income, while the poorest fifth (lower class) must make do

with only 5%. Income inequality is a basic characteristic of a class system. Upper class - 1% to 3% of the American population can be characterized as upper class. There are a number of ways that people fall into this classification, wealth being the most obvious, but leaders in any profession, business, or cultural area can be characterized as upper class. Portions of the upper class are highly educated, cultured and influential. Parts are simply rich with only modest personal skills and achievements. Families who have been upper class for generations display a distinctive lifestyle. Newcomers, the nouveau riche, often do not share this culture but may through socialization in private school and other elite institutions acquire it over time. A tiny portion of the upper class is highly influential and has an advantage as its members seek high office in government or engage in efforts to influence events. Throughout the history of the US opportunities have arisen for the accumulation of great wealth. A portion of the current upper class consists of the descendants of those who were lucky and aggressive enough to take advantage of those opportunities.

Upper middle class - 10% or so of the U.S. population. This is the well-educated, highly skilled portion of the population which works in executive and professional fields. Their work plays a central part in their lives and in their self- and public-image. They are leaders in their communities and are socially, culturally and politically active. They may have modest investments in industry and business, but generally depend on income from remunerative work. A portion of the upper middle class are owners of small businesses. The historical middle class or bourgeoisie, considered as a class which supports itself through investment and management of capital, is split in the United States between the upper middle class and the upper class. About 5% of the population of the United States is engaged in agriculture as the proprietors of independent farms. Once the dominant American social class, this group diminished during the 20th century. It is now characterized by modest income but significant capital holdings as land and equipment. Generally this group can be characterized as upper middle class, but portions of this group fall into the lower middle class or upper class. About 70% of the population is made up of working class people who work for wages in blue-collar, white-collar and agricultural occupations. The 30% of the population which works in white-collar work is sometimes characterized as the "lower middle-class". While they may be unemployed from time to time, in general, members of the working class earn a modest income through some skilled or semi-skilled occupation. Although they are subject to some economic insecurity due to fluctuations in the economy and layoffs due to plant closings, in general they have a stable and dependable income. A small part of the working class, especially those in organized occupations, enjoy an above-average income. Working class people often have some training and education, may belong to a labor union and other organizations and have a modest level of political participation. Their life is generally not organized about their work, but around their personal life with an emphasis on recreational and family activities.

Lower class - consists of about 20% of the population and is deficient in all three factors (wealth, prestige, power). Many members of the important minority groups in the United States – Hispanics, African Americans, Asian Americans, and Native Americans – fall into the lower class, but the majority of the lower class in the United States consists of persons of European origin, the majority group. The derogatory term “white trash” attaches to some of these people. The lower class is poorly educated, with low literacy and other employment skills. Their health is often poor, with a life expectancy below the rest of the population. They tend to be socially isolated, are less often members of social and cultural groups and have a low rate of political participation. There is a high rate of unemployment and physical disability. Lack of money defines the class, as does lack of power and prestige. A significant portion of the lower class, especially single women with children, receives welfare.

Lower class is populated by many of the elderly, as well as single mothers with dependent children (“feminization of poverty”) and people who cannot find regular work.

- 2000 – poverty line was 13,500 \$ . In 2000 16,5 %: men rearing children alone  
30%: women rearing children alone
- Women make only two-thirds of male salaries. Middle class is disappearing, now highly diversified, it consist of working class and lower middle class. Factors which contribute to the decrease in the proportion of households categorized as middle-class one with an income between 75% and 125% of the nation’s median households income):
- high unemployment (loss of a status)
- new growth industries and non-union workplaces
- the rise in single-mother households (“feminization of poverty”)
- the rise of two-income households (in 2000- 72%; in 1950- 22%)

While relatively few identify with the working class, the vast majority of Americans readily claim to be part of the middle class, a term that is not described with much precision. The lack of class identification is also a matter of American ideology, which makes each individual responsible for his own fate. Many Americans say with pride that there are no class differences in the US, but this is not really true. Class differences exist, but social mobility is possible with hard work (American Dream). Social mobility is easiest for whites of Northern European origin – WASPs. People of other ethnic origins, particularly African Americans, Hispanics still experience strong discrimination, and are treated worse and given fewer opportunities than other people of similar ability.