

# Introduction: Conflict and Controversy in American Society

Perhaps the most enduring feature of American society and its political system is the juxtaposition of apparently deep conflicts and divisions with a remarkable capacity not only for survival but also for regeneration and renewal. More than once foreign commentators have written the United States off as a system in danger of failure or even disintegration. Such sentiments were common at the time of the Civil War and its aftermath, during the Great Depression of the 1930s and during the riots and assassinations of the 1960s.

Even in the calmer environment of the last thirty years controversy and conflict have never been far from the surface. Of course, it could be argued that all societies are to a greater or lesser extent characterized by division and disputes. In most cases, however, these either relate to ethnic, religious or linguistic divisions that have existed for centuries or they involve problems that are common to most societies. In modern Europe, for example, some of the deepest conflicts are ethnic or religious in nature, as Northern Irish and Basque nationalism and the trials and tribulations of the Balkans show. But for most countries, including mainland Britain, France, the Scandinavian states and Germany, the problems tend to be broadly similar in nature. In all four, such things as economic performance – and in particular questions relating to employment – the provision of pensions and other benefits, education and health care systems tend to dominate political discourse. As far as politics is concerned, debate tends to focus on the role of political parties and how their programmes can be turned into public policy. More rarely does debate turn to more fundamental questions such as the level of trust in political institutions or the political role of the courts.

While these same issues are obviously important in the United States, the nature of what may be called the ‘controversy agenda’ is different, and at two levels. First, it tends to be substantively different in content. In the United States passions are aroused by a range of issues that either do not apply or are of little import in Europe. This applies both to policy areas such as abortion, capital punishment, affirmative action and gun control, and to political questions such as non-voting, divided government and the role of direct democracy. Second, the nature of public debate on these and other issues is qualitatively different in the United States. Debate is often more passionate and reaches deep into society.

This is particularly true of those policy questions that involve moral absolutes (abortion, capital punishment) or which raise questions of justice and fairness (direct democracy, campaign finance and affirmative action). In contrast to the situation in many European countries, these issues are hotly debated not just by educated elites but by large numbers of ordinary Americans. Often the debates take place in isolation from each other. Activists in the abortion debate, for example, may devote all their political energies to that question and play little part in other areas of public policy. While not unique to the United States, ‘single-issue politics’ is much more pervasive in America than in Europe. As a result, the two main political parties are often not the main vehicles for the articulation of interests in such areas as abortion and affirmative action. For either party fully to embrace one side or another in these disputes would be to invite electoral re-cremations. Instead, advocacy groups and individual politicians – with or without the approval of state and national parties – play the lead role. This will become apparent in the chapter-by-chapter discussions that follow.

This is not to say that more traditional ‘distributional’ issues such as health care, welfare and education are also not the subjects of passionate debate. They are, as subsequent chapters will show. But even in these areas the nature of the debate is different from that in Europe. Possibly because they are less cynical than Europeans or have been inculcated with a spirit of optimism and opportunity, Americans expect fast and effective solutions to societal problems. Perhaps this is why they argue the pros and cons of an issue with such vehemence and passion. Hence the debate on welfare reform includes those who actually believe that through job training and the provision of child care virtually *all* government-provided welfare can be eliminated. Similarly, many affirmative action programmes have been premised on the belief that positive discrimination can purge educational disadvantage from society. And even when these expectations are dashed, the beliefs remain, the agenda is modified and the battle is joined anew.

For this reason some commentators have identified an almost religious dimension to the values underpinning many of these debates. Samuel Huntington has called it a ‘creedal passion’ that raises expectations beyond what can realistically be achieved.<sup>1</sup> But his conclusion that dashed expectations will bring disharmony has proved to be over-pessimistic. In the twenty years since the publication of *The Promise of Disharmony* the ‘politics of passion’ have been as persuasive and influential as ever, but measured by most objective indicators – riots, protests, the rise of alternative political parties – there has been remarkably little disharmony. Certainly there has been intellectual and political conflict over practice, policies and programmes. But open and violent conflict has been much rarer and largely confined to an extremist fringe. This brings us back to the fact that, in spite of apparently deep divisions and conflicts, the American system seems remarkably resilient. It *can* adapt in the face of great social and economic change – if sometimes with difficulty.

The purpose of this book is not, however, to explain this resilience – although some of the reasons can be inferred from the discussion in the individual chapters. It is, rather, to familiarize readers with the nature of the current debate in a wide range of issue areas. Sixteen areas are covered, and for the most part they

coincide with the more important debates raging in politics and society. That said, we do not pretend to be comprehensive in our coverage. The actual choice of issues sometimes reflects the interests of the authors rather than their relative importance. Certainly a number of vital questions, including the debate on environmental protection and the role of gender in society, have been excluded on these grounds. We intend to correct such biases in a later edition.

The controversies are broadly divided between those that concern political processes and institutions and those that involve substantive public policy questions. The choice of the former was certainly easier than the choice of the latter. At the turn of the century all the process controversies are at the very heart of political debate, and in almost every case they have assumed that status only in the last few decades. Hence the debate on divided government (the presidency controlled by one party and Congress by another, chapter 1) has naturally been a matter of concern only since divided government became the norm rather than the exception after 1968. The issue here is clear: can a government divided into partisan camps by an institutional division of power be an effective government? Declining trust in government (chapter 2) also originates in the 1960s, as does the decline in voter turnout (chapter 3). In both cases, commentators worry that the antipathy shown towards government on the part of many Americans and the apparent indifference to democratic participation reflect a deeper malaise in society. The debate on campaign finance reform (chapter 4) goes back much further, but it is only in recent years with the growth of ‘soft money’ campaign contributions that the issue has assumed a place at the centre of the reform agenda. Why, the critics ask, should a privileged few apparently be able to ‘buy’ election outcomes?

Chapter 5 is of a slightly different order. The debate on containing presidential power originates with Vietnam and Watergate and, it could be argued, is now moot, given that modern American presidents seem much less powerful than before, given the constraints imposed on them by divided government, public opinion and the media. While this is true, the presidency remains the main focus of political attention, both at home and abroad. Presidents retain great power, not least in foreign affairs. Even a president such as George W. Bush, who was elected by a minority of the voters, and has to live with *de facto* divided government,<sup>2</sup> has shown this.

Judicial power (the subject of chapter 6) has become a matter of great importance, given that the majority on the Supreme Court is at present both conservative and highly activist. The Court was, of course, the effective final arbiter of the 2000 presidential election, and we can expect further forays into the political thicket over the next few years. We can be sure that all will be highly controversial. The final area covered in this part of the book is the use of direct democratic devices in many of the states. Does the use of initiatives and referendums improve the quality of public policy or are these devices a cover, either for discrimination against minorities or for the exercise of power by the financially advantaged?

All the subjects covered in Part II have a uniquely American tinge. Chapter 8 concerns the debate on gun control and shows how the assumption that the

public have the right to own guns is deeply embedded both in the American consciousness and in American politics. The United States has, of course, always been a nation of immigrants, and the debate on immigration and immigration control is as passionate now as at any time in recent history. Chapter 9 provides an account of this debate by focusing on the economic, social and cultural advantages and disadvantages of mass immigration. Controversy on affirmative action (chapter 10) is also at a high level, with some proposing an end to all such programmes while others remain convinced that affirmative action will remedy all the wrongs visited upon America's racial minorities and especially African Americans.

The great paradox of American health care is that almost nobody is happy with the system, yet it has become the most expensive in the world. Chapter 11 tries to explain why this is so by outlining the many attempts to reform health care delivery over the last twenty years. Foreign observers are constantly amazed that the American states continue to execute large numbers of their own people. Chapter 12 provides a background to the capital punishment debate and assesses the prospects of reform. Another area where the United States seems to have departed from the norm is in the provision of welfare for the poor. Chapter 13 asks why Americans are so reluctant to provide for the needy and assesses the prospects of the radical welfare reform measures introduced in 1996. Equally fierce passions are aroused by the abortion issue that is the subject of chapter 14. Why is it that so many Americans ascribe such an important status to the human foetus while others argue passionately that women should always have the right to choose?

The final chapters (15–16) deal with the role of the United States in the broader world. Both issues (realism versus idealism in foreign policy and the free trade versus protectionism debate) have a renewed poignancy in the context of the post-Cold War world and of the economic consequences of globalization. Can the United States carve out a constructive role in this new world, or will it revert to an unthinking and potentially dangerous isolationism?

Each of the chapters follows the character of the ongoing debate in each of the issue areas. In some cases this involves placing most of the emphasis on academic debate. With direct democracy and divided government, for example, much of the substantive evidence on both sides of the debate has been provided by academic political scientists. This is not to say that the broader society is not also engaged with the pros and cons. It is merely to state that the claims of both sides can be confirmed or disconfirmed primarily through the use of scientific evidence. In other issue areas, while scientific evidence may indeed be invoked, it is less important because the subject matter involves moral absolutes. Hence, with abortion, capital punishment and gun control, both sides of the debate start from diametrically opposed value positions that are unlikely ever to be reconciled. In these chapters, therefore, some attempt is made to explain why it is that such views are held.

With these and a number of other issues the debate is fairly clear cut and lends itself to an account of the argument used by each side. In these chapters, therefore, we have listed the arguments for and against each perspective in a fairly

systematic way. In other cases, while the issues involved remain highly salient and controversial, it is not sensible to list the pros and cons in this way. No one is *against* the principle of health care reform, for example. The debate is about how to choose between competing reforms. Similarly, both liberals and conservatives see advantages in an activist Supreme Court and both groups have in the past seen advantages in a passive Court. This chapter is, therefore, more concerned with explaining these nuances than with providing a simple list of the arguments for and against activism. Few argue that declining trust in government is a good thing. Some may claim that it is indicative of a mature democracy, but no one seeks to *encourage* a decline in trust. Accordingly, chapter 2 provides competing explanations for falling trust.

All the chapters have one thing in common, however. All are designed to provide an up-to-date and dispassionate account of the nature of debate on those issues that at the beginning of the twenty-first century dominate political discourse. They are also intended as an introduction to these debates. Hopefully readers will be sufficiently stimulated to study some or all of these subjects in greater depth. Few countries are intrinsically as interesting as the United States, whether in terms of its extraordinary political arrangements, its social make-up or its historical development. This was true 100 years ago when the United States was widely regarded as a beacon of democracy in a predominantly autocratic world and it remains true to this day, even when the country and its people are often regarded with envy and suspicion. We are confident that, having read the chapters that follow, readers will agree that the debates and arguments that dominate American public life are likely to remain a subject of international importance and interest for many years to come.

## NOTES

- 1 Samuel P. Huntington, *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony* (Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1981).
- 2 Although the vice-president's casting vote in the Senate originally gave the Republicans a nominal majority, this lasted just four months until the defection of Jim Jeffords to become an Independent. In the House this majority is just seven.

