**American Political Values: The Foundation of American Government**

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The political ideas and values at the core of American politics and government weren't invented by the First Continental Congress in 1774 or the Constitutional Convention of 1787-1789. Instead, the Founding Fathers brought the prevailing political values of the colonies' leadership with them to these formative gatherings.

These important American independence activists and Founding Fathers reflected the political beliefs and values of their time. The new democratic republic that emerged from the Constitutional Convention was built upon pervasive beliefs and core values that remain influential in the 21st century. Liberty, equality, justice, and democracy were woven into the very fabric of the new American environment. While none of these were American inventions, they often evolved with a distinct American slant. The individuals who went to Philadelphia were educated and deeply familiar with classical political thought, from Plato to Locke and Rousseau. Their ideas of representative government, liberty, equality, and justice were enormously influential. Understanding these values, how they've evolved, and how they interact is crucial to understanding American government and politics.

**Liberty**Liberty, the most frequently discussed American value, refers to individuals' freedom to act, speak, and think as they choose, with minimal government interference. It's a vital part of the Bill of Rights, protecting freedoms like speech, religion, and assembly. Like many American values, it emphasizes individual autonomy and the right to pursue one's own path. However, most Americans understand that liberty isn't absolute; it must be balanced with the rights and safety of others. As the saying goes, "My freedom to swing my fist ends where your nose begins."

**Equality**This unavoidable limit on liberty in a peaceful society leads us to another important American value: equality. In the American context, equality holds that all individuals are created equal and are entitled to equal opportunities and treatment under the law, regardless of their background, race, gender or beliefs. The Declaration of Independence famously states, "all men are created equal," a revolutionary idea at the time.

While the nation has struggled to live up to this ideal—starting with the Constitution's initial extension of real equality only to white men—considerable progress has been made over the last 250 years. Despite slavery, segregation and widespread de facto and legal discrimination, the pursuit of equality has been a constant force in American political value evolution. Civil rights movements and efforts to dismantle barriers to equality continue today, ebbing and flowing depending on the ideologies of those in power.

The interaction between liberty and equality is crucial to understanding how American political values play out. Complete liberty cannot exist if some are denied basic rights or opportunities due to systemic inequalities or cultural bias. Conversely, efforts to ensure equality often involve limiting certain liberties, such as the freedom to discriminate. In essence, the best part of American values, as reflected in the American experience, has been the ability to balance liberty and equality and avoid pushing either one to the extreme detriment of the other.

**Justice**Justice is another important American value. It's the principle of fairness and involves processes that protect rights, punish wrongdoers, and redress wrongs. In practice, this has emerged as due process. It's about applying laws fairly through the American legal system, protecting the innocent, and holding the guilty accountable through a fair trial and the right to a vigorous defense. Justice seeks to correct imbalances and ensure everyone receives their rightful due. We can think of it as a value in its own right, and also as a bridge between liberty and equality. For instance, if a person's liberty is infringed upon, justice demands a fair process to restore it. If equality is denied, justice seeks to rectify the disparity. Without a commitment to justice, both liberty and equality can become hollow promises.

**Democracy**Democracy is another important value the Founders brought to the table, even though the Constitution they created didn't fully realize it. It's a system of government rooted in the consent of the governed and a value that empowers citizens to govern themselves, typically through elected representatives but occasionally directly (as seen in referendum votes or town meetings). It's the mechanism through which the values of liberty, equality, and justice are realized when unhindered by authoritarian limits. Much of American history can be seen as a struggle to enhance and extend democracy from its original limited expression. Examples of how democracy continues to evolve in the U.S. include the enfranchisement of women, the direct election of senators, and voting rights for all, despite limitations like gerrymandering, campaign finance laws that favor the wealthy, and federal judges appointed for life.

In a democracy, all citizens have the right to participate in their governance, express their opinions and hold their leaders accountable through periodic general elections. This civic participation is essential for ensuring that laws reflect the will of the people and protect their freedoms. Democracy provides the framework for open debate, peaceful transitions of power, and the ongoing struggle to define and refine what liberty, equality, and justice mean for an evolving society.

**The Interplay of Values**The interplay among these values is dynamic and often challenging. In our current system, the increase in executive power beyond what the Constitution envisioned, the liberty of free speech (which often clashes with equality when hate speech is involved), and demands for justice frequently lead to conflicts among these values. However, these enduring values, which most Americans support even if they disagree on implementation, emerge from these conflicts. Democracy is both the arena for these debates and a value in itself that remains a strong factor in American beliefs.

These values are the bedrock of American politics and government. Thoughtful citizens understand their importance and their interplay, promoting their beliefs in the political arena based on their values. How they evolve is what makes American society both fascinating and fluid.