Pázmány Péter Katolikus Egyetem
Bölcsészet- és Társadalomtudományi Kar

Pintér Károly

Introduction to the US

A Textbook for Students of English

egyetemi jegyzet

ISBN 978-963-308-424-3

Budapest, 2022

Introduction to the US

A Textbook for students of English

Károly Pintér

Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Budapest, 2022

CONTENTS

Introduction

This textbook is the "sister volume" of my *Introduction the Britain* textbook, written primarily for students majoring in English BA programs in Hungarian universities. It is intended to be used as a downloadable digital background reading for the similarly titled lecture course, and its purpose is to provide a broad introduction to the present-day United States of America, beginning with its geography and fundamental values, then discussing the main features of American society, the system of government, law, education, and American religion. Since the textbook is the required reading for a one-semester lecture course, it could not aim for an all-encompassing coverage of such a huge, diverse, and colorful nation as the US: for reasons of space, several other interesting and relevant topics (for example, US economy and business, the American entertainment industry, etc.) were left out of discussion.

The textbook has been written primarily for Hungarian students as target audience. It presupposes a Hungarian (or more broadly speaking, European) cultural background, it occasionally makes comparisons with Hungary, and sometimes uses Hungarian terms and phrases to facilitate understanding. Yet I strongly hope that students of non-Hungarian background will also find it readable and useful.

Each chapter is divided into subchapters for easier study and understanding; the text occasionally refers the reader to other chapters or subchapters of the book for a more detailed discussion of the issue at hand. Key concepts and terms as well as the most important information within the chapters are printed in **bold** to make it easier to select and focus on the most relevant information while studying. At the end of each chapter, I have also collected the key concepts and terms in alphabetical order. It is meant as an opportunity for self-checking: if you can recall the meaning and definition of these terms, you can rest assured that you have understood your reading sufficiently.

There are generally two kinds of footnotes in the textbook. Some difficult concepts are defined and explained in footnotes; such notes are not "optional reading" but form part of the relevant material of the textbook. The historical events that are summarized in occasional footnotes are among the most important in American history, so some familiarity with them is necessary to better understand the origin and development of American society and culture. The short biographical information about famous

personalities, on the other hand, are not "required reading", they just offer some additional context to satisfy your potential curiosity. Other footnotes are occasionally used to make minor comments or provide information about the origin of photos or illustrations: these footnotes are obviously not part of the exam material.

Such a textbook naturally requires lots of illustrations: maps, charts, photos, and the like. Still, I have kept them to a minimum for two reasons: one is copyright issues, which are complicated to resolve, therefore I have included only copyright-free materials, primarily my own photographs. But there was another reason, namely that I wanted to keep the text printable in case you wish to read it in hard copy, and large colorful illustrations do not appear very well on a black-and-white printout. Nonetheless, I hope the pictures and illustrations will break the monotony of the text.

I hope readers will find the textbook interesting and useful reading to broaden their familiarity with various aspects of the United States. In case there are any errors or problems in the text, feel free to inform me about them at the following email address: pinter.karoly@btk.ppke.hu.

Finally, let me express my gratitude to Dr. Dániel Cseh, lecturer of the American Studies Department of Eötvös Loránd University, who has carefully proofread the textbook and provided a lot of helpful commentary and corrective proposals. All remaining errors are exclusively mine, of course.

Károly Pintér, associate professor, Faculty of Humanities, Pázmány Péter Catholic University

1. Physical geography of the US

1.1. General data

Total land area of the US	9,631,418 sq km
Total land area of the US (without water)	9,161,923 sq km
US population (2020 census)	331,449,281 (50 states only) 334,735,155 (including Puerto Rico)
Lowest elevation	Death Valley, Nevada: -86 m
Highest elevation	Denali (formerly Mount McKinley), Alaska: 6,190 m
Highest elevation in Continental US	Mount Whitney, California: 4,417 m
GDP of the US (2019)	$21,433,000,000,000 (21.4 trillion dollars!)
GDP per capita (2019)	$65,280

1.2. Dimensions

The United States of America is one of the largest countries in the world. Its territory is over 9 million sq kms, ranking 3rd among all countries after Russia and Canada, while its population, well above 330 million people in 2020, is also the 3rd largest in the world after China and India. But the economy of the US is the most dominant in the world: its **Gross Domestic Product (GDP)** exceeded $21.4 trillion in 2019 (that's 12 zeros!), which is about 30% higher than the GDP of China, the second largest economy in the world. The GDP of the US made up about 24% of the world's total economic output in 2019, while the US population makes up a little more than 4% of the estimated 7.8 billion people currently living on Earth. As a result, the US is a very powerful and extremely rich country: the average **GDP per capita** was over $65,000 in 2019.

Geographically speaking, the US occupies somewhat less than half of the North American continent (Americans routinely speak of the "Americas", mentally separating North and South America, even though geographers naturally look at America as one land mass), with **Canada** as its single northern and **Mexico** as its single southern neighbor. Besides the land borders shared with these two countries, all other borders of the US are seacoasts: Its east coast overlooks the **Atlantic Ocean**, its southeastern coast is on the **Gulf of Mexico** (also called the Mexican Gulf), while its west coast overlooks the **Pacific**

Ocean. Besides Canada and Mexico, the closest "neighbors" of US are the small nations in the Caribbean Sea, for example Cuba and the Bahamas.

The vastness of the US is difficult to imagine for somebody, especially for a European, who has never visited the country. It may be helpful to compare the US to Europe. The territory of the US is roughly equal to the whole of Europe, including the Eastern European part of Russia as far as the Ural Mountains. The distance between the Atlantic Coast, called the **East Coast** by Americans, and the Pacific Coast, or **West Coast**, is over 4100 kms, so it takes at least 5 days to drive from **New York City** to **San Francisco**, California, without any sightseeing in between. This is longer than the distance between Lisbon and Moscow, the two most distant capitals of Europe (about 3900 kms). The north-south distances are significantly smaller but still, the West Coast stretches over 1700 kms from **Seattle**, Washington state, in the north to **San Diego**, California, in the south, while the East Coast is even longer: the distance between **Boston**, Massachusetts, and **Miami**, Florida, is about 2000 kms – comparable to the distance between Riga and Athens.

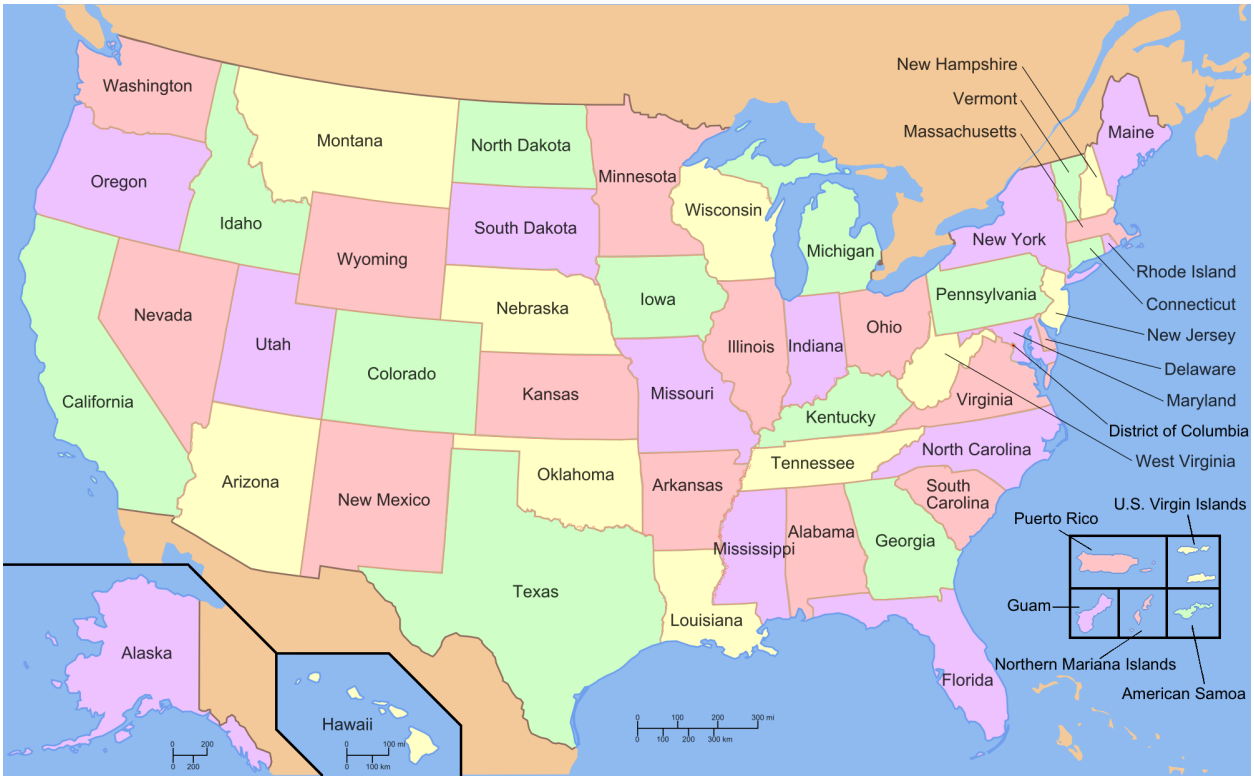
1.3. Political geography: the States

The huge territory of the US is politically divided into 50 states, each of them having an autonomous government with wide powers in many areas of life, such as law, education, or trade. The 50 states form a federal republic that is governed by the federal or national government. The national capital is **Washington, D.C.**, the only US city that belongs to none of the states: its territory, called the **District of Columbia**,[1] is governed directly by the federal government.

Out of the 50 member states of the US, 48 states form a contiguous territorial unit between the Atlantic and the Pacific coast, which means you can travel from any one of them into any other overland, without crossing into another country. These 48 states are

[1] *District of Columbia:* It was created in 1791 after the states of Virginia and Maryland, which are separated by the Potomac River, each donated roughly half of a square 10 miles on each side for the purposes of a federal capital. They started constructing the federal buildings on the north bank (originally belonging to Maryland) and named it after Washington, while the district itself was named after Columbus. In 1801, after the federal government moved to Washington, the entire district was brought under direct federal control, separating it from the original states. In 1846, Virginia demanded the southern half of the district back, therefore today's D.C. consists of a triangle bordered by the Potomac River on the south, the former territory of Maryland.

called "**the Continental US**". The remaining two states – Alaska and Hawaii – are separated from the other states by huge distances. **Alaska** is in the arctic northwestern corner of the North American continent, separated from the rest of the US by Western Canada, while **Hawaii** is located in the tropical region of the Pacific Ocean, about 4000 kms southwest of the West Coast of the US. These two states have their own special characteristics, both geographically and culturally. Furthermore, the US governs a number of small islands in the Caribbean Sea – the most important one is **Puerto Rico** –, and also in the Pacific Ocean.



(Source of map: https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=1337120)

The size and the distribution of the states have little connection to the physical geography of the US: they were established in different historical periods and under varied circumstances, even though sometimes large rivers or mountain ranges were set as borders. In general, the smallest states are on the northern Atlantic Coast, and their average area gets larger as one goes westward and southward. The population density shows the opposite tendency: whereas the northern Atlantic coast is densely populated, further inland there are fewer big cities, and the countryside also has a lower population. On average, most American states would be sizable countries in Europe: for instance,

Hungary's territory is slightly smaller than Indiana's – roughly 94,000 km² – and Indiana is considered a rather small American state, only 38th by territory among the 50 states. On the other hand, some of the territorially largest states in the central lowland and in the northern Rocky Mountains (e.g. Montana, Wyoming, or South Dakota) have a population of one million or below, that is, less than 10% of Hungary's, while their territory is several times the size of Hungary. The two exceptions are **California** on the southern Pacific coast and **Texas** on the Mexican Gulf, which are among the largest both by area and by population. But even within these states, the great majority of the inhabitants is concentrated in the crowded big cities and their suburbs, whereas the huge deserts and high mountains are practically empty.

1.4. Surface and rivers

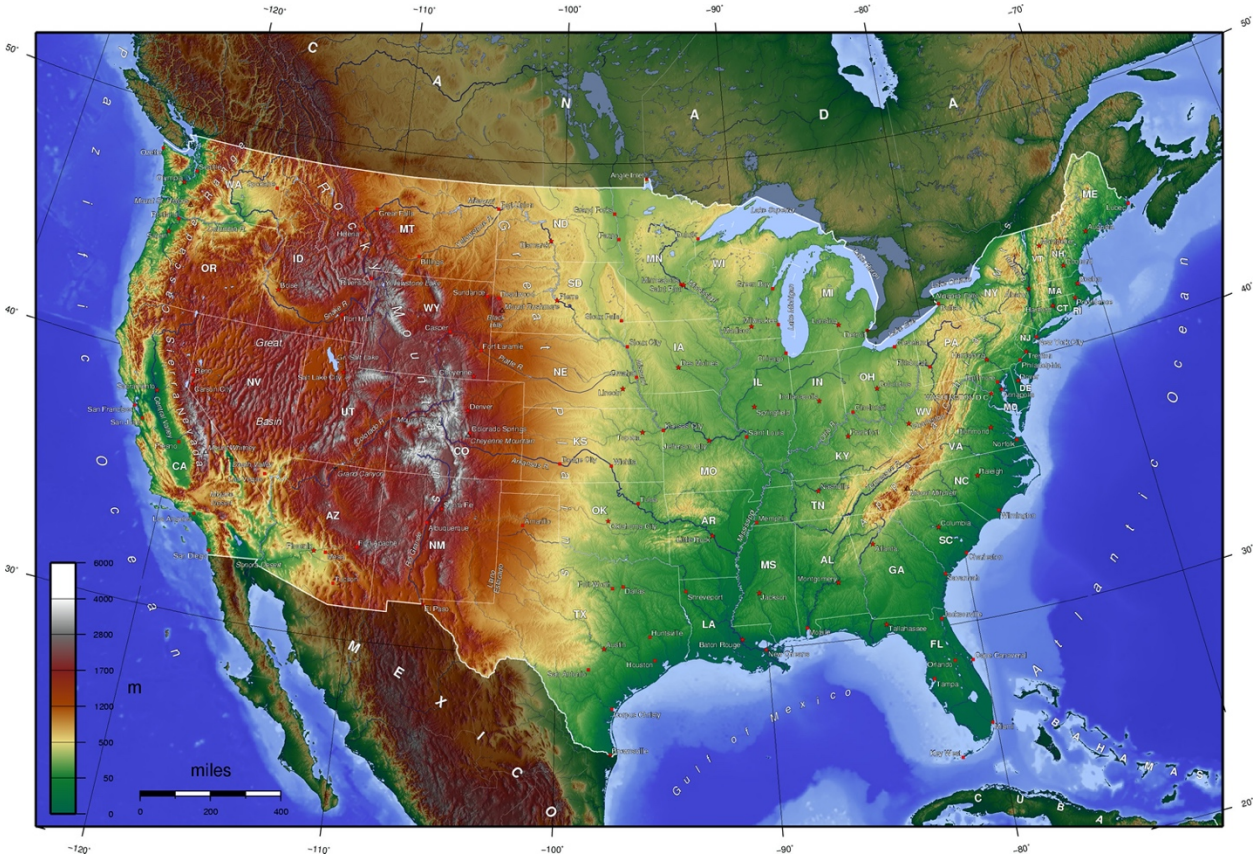
It is an interesting aspect of the surface of the continental US that all the major dividing lines are oriented in a roughly north-south direction. There are three mountain ranges: the **Appalachian Mountains** (or Appalachians) along the East Coast, the **Rocky Mountains** (or the Rockies) in the central western part of the continent, and a coastal mountain range along the West Coast which has a variety of names (e.g. Cascades in the Northwest, Sierra Nevada in California). Furthermore, the largest river of the country, the Mississippi, also flows directly southward across the central lowland. The four major regions of the country are separated from one another by the major mountains. These are the following:

(1) the coastal plain east of the Appalachians, along the Atlantic Coast; it is very narrow up north but gets wider further south and continues westward along the Gulf of Mexico until it merges with the central lowland.

(2) the relatively low Appalachian Mountains, stretching in a northeast-southwest direction from the eastern Canadian border to northern Alabama and Georgia.

(3) the Interior Plains, or the central lowland between the Appalachians in the East and the Rockies in the West, which is either totally flat or gently undulates, and it is divided into two, roughly equal parts by the Mississippi River.

(4) the high mountains and deserts of the West from the Rockies to the coastal range; a rugged and arid terrain characterized mostly by a desert climate and vegetation.



(Source of map: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:USA_topo_en.jpg)

In a very simplified way, one may say that the majority of the area of the US is flatland, but the more westward one goes, the more chances there are for bumping into huge mountains, some of which equal the highest peaks of the European Alps in elevation. The tallest mountain peaks of the Rocky Mountains can be found in the state of **Colorado** (with over 50 peaks higher than 4000 m!), while similarly tall peaks are also located in the **Sierra Nevada** in eastern California, among them **Mount Whitney**, the tallest of the Continental US at 4421 m (although it surpasses Mount Elbert in Colorado only by 20 ms!). The highest range of Rocky Mountains also forms the so-called Continental Divide, which means that it is a watershed between eastern and western US: all rivers flow either in an eastern or a western-southwestern direction from the slopes of the Rockies.

The largest water systems of North America are the Mississippi-Missouri and the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence systems. The **Mississippi River** rises in the northern Plains and flows straight south until it reaches the Gulf of Mexico near **New Orleans**. Its longest tributary is the **Missouri River**, which rises in the northern Rockies and continues in a

general east-southeast direction until it flows into the Mississippi at **St. Louis**. The largest left-bank tributary of the Mississippi is the **Ohio River**, which comes down from the northern Appalachians in a southwestern direction and unites with the Tennessee River just before flowing into the Mississippi. All taken together, the Mississippi and its tributaries drain about one-third of the territory of the US, and they have functioned during history as major waterways for travel, trade and discovery.

The five **Great Lakes** – Lake Superior, Lake Huron, Lake Michigan, Lake Eire and Lake Ontario – are all interconnected by short rivers and waterfalls (the most famous among them is **Niagara Falls** flowing from the Eire into the Ontario), and their excess water is drained into the Atlantic Ocean by the **St. Lawrence River**. The Lakes and the upper part of the St. Lawrence form a natural border between the US and Canada, except for **Lake Michigan**, which is fully within the territory of the US.

View of the American part of Niagara Falls (right) from the Canadian side and the Rainbow Bridge (left; photo by Károly Pintér)

Besides these two large systems, there are a few other major waterways, such as the **Colorado River**, flowing southwest from the southern Rockies across the arid southwestern US, while also forming the world-famous **Grand Canyon**; and the **Rio Grande**, which flows southeast from the same area and forms part of the border between the US and Mexico. Along the coastal plain in the east and the southeast, there are a number of relatively short rivers carrying a lot of water. Perhaps the most famous of them is the **Hudson River**, which flows into the Atlantic Ocean at New York City.

1.5. Climate

The climate of the main regions is determined by latitude (how far north that region is situated), terrain (mountains, hills, basins, etc.) and distance from the sea. Based on these, geographers distinguish eight main climatic regions within the US. The variety of climate within the US is even greater than within Europe: there is the humid continental, with great extremes of temperature in winter and summer (most of the flat inland areas west of the Appalachians), the hot and humid subtropical (the southeastern coastal plain from the Carolinas to East Texas), the mild and rainy marine (the Pacific coast from San Francisco northward), the sunny and dry mediterranean (the coastal area of Central and Southern California), the dry and arid desert (the Southwest between the Sierra Nevada and the Rockies), the cool highland (the Rockies from Colorado to Montana), the cold arctic (in Alaska), and the tropical (in Hawaii).

In a more simplified way, the continental US is often divided into a Frost Belt and a Sun Belt. The **Sun Belt** roughly equals the southern half (in terms of territory, the smaller half) of the US from California in the west to the Carolinas in the east, which tends to be hotter all year, and hardly ever experiences harsh winters. While the **Frost Belt** is supposed to cover the entire northern half of the US, including naturally the extensive mountainous areas of the northwest, most people understand a more restricted area under it: the East Coast and the Great Lakes area east of the Mississippi River, which used to contain the majority of US population. These territories have a continental climate similar to Central and Eastern Europe, but with occasionally even greater extremes in terms of summer heat and winter cold. Since World War II, businesses and people have tended to migrate from the Frost Belt states to the Sun Belt in large numbers: the most popular target states are California, Texas, and Florida, which have become the three largest states by population by 2020, overtaking such traditionally dominant Frost Belt states as **New York, Pennsylvania**, and **Illinois**.

For a European, it is interesting to note that most of the territory of the US lies further south than most of Europe: such northern cities as **Chicago** and New York are on the same latitude as Rome and Naples, respectively, while a southern city like New Orleans is as far south as Cairo in Africa! The latitude of Budapest roughly matches that of Seattle on the Pacific west coast, the northernmost large city of the US. This fact is more

noticeable during summers which tend to be rather hot and humid even in the northern regions, while winters over much of the US can be rather severe, with cold temperatures and occasional big snowfalls. The most characteristic difference compared to the climate of Europe is the stronger tendency of US weather toward extremes: sudden changes in temperature, heatwaves, flood rains, thunderstorms or snowfalls in unexpected seasons are not uncommon, while tornadoes or hurricanes can bring huge destruction. The main reason for these extreme changes is the openness of the North American continent to air masses both from the north and the south (there are no mountain ranges running east-west), and the lack of warm ocean currents (like the way the Gulf Stream tempers the climate of Western Europe).

1.6. Test Yourself – Maps and games

Test yourself whether you can identify major geographic locations on an outline map of the US. Warning: not all of these were mentioned in the chapter!

Geophysical regions: https://online.seterra.com/en/vgp/3249

Major rivers: https://online.seterra.com/en/vgp/3134

The 50 states: https://online.seterra.com/en/vgp/3003

Major cities: https://online.seterra.com/en/vgp/3095

12 National landmarks: https://online.seterra.com/en/vgp/3400

1.7. Key terms and concepts

Alaska
Appalachian Mountains
Atlantic Ocean
Boston
California
Canada
Chicago
Colorado River

Colorado State
Continental US
District of Columbia
East Coast
Frost Belt
GDP per capita
Grand Canyon
Great Lakes
Gross Domestic Product (GDP)
Gulf of Mexico
Hawaii
Hudson River
Illinois
Lake Michigan
Mexico
Miami
Mississippi River
Missouri River
Mount Whitney
New Orleans
New York City
New York State
Niagara Falls
Ohio River
Pacific Ocean
Pennsylvania
Puerto Rico
Rio Grande
Rocky Mountains
San Diego
San Francisco
Seattle
Sierra Nevada
St. Lawrence River
St. Louis
Sun Belt
Texas
Washington D.C.
West Coast

2. The Idea of America: Values and Symbols that Unite the Nation

2.1. American national identity

The United States of America is a unique country not just in its geographic features, but in several other respects, especially when compared to the nations of Europe or Asia. Although the territory of the present USA had been inhabited for thousands of years by a wide variety of Native American groups, the present-day country is not their creation: it came into being as a federation of former British colonies along the Atlantic coast in 1776, reached its present territorial expanse across the North American continent by 1853, and some of its remote western regions were integrated into the country only by the early 20th century. In this sense, the United States is a relatively young nation by European standards, with an extraordinarily mixed population, and its racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity is continuously increasing as new immigrants keep arriving in the country.

What are those historical and cultural elements that lend a sense of nationhood and unity to this strikingly heterogeneous society? In this chapter, we are focusing on the main elements of the American national identity, its main values and symbols.

2.2. Early American history: the colonial heritage

The United States of America is a creation of European – predominantly British – white settlers, who came from their home countries to North America in the 17th and 18th century. From 1607, the foundation of the first permanent English settlement of Jamestown in Virginia, to the Declaration of Independence in 1776, a string of English and later (after 1707) British **colonies** emerged along the Atlantic coast, from Massachusetts in northern New England to Georgia in the south. The later American historical consciousness selectively borrowed certain elements from the **colonial period** of the nation's 'prehistory' and declared them symbolic of the American experience in the new world.

The most famous of these colonial symbols are the **Pilgrims** and their arrival in **New England** (also discussed in ch. 3.2) in 1620 on the ship Mayflower. Even though

Jamestown in Virginia had been founded more than a decade earlier, its difficult start (most of the early settlers died of malaria and other unfamiliar diseases) and bloody conflicts with the local Native Americans made it unsuitable to turn into a national founding myth. The small Puritan community, on the other hand, which left the Old World to find a place where they would be allowed to practice their religion peacefully, and ultimately landed in a completely uninhabited part of the East Coast, was a perfect encapsulation of both the more noble motivations of European settlement and the common experience of the earliest pioneers. The support of the local Native American tribe (they taught the white settlers how to grow **corn**, an American plant) was crucial for the Pilgrims to survive the harsh winter, which gave rise to the earliest American national holiday, that of **Thanksgiving**: it is nowadays celebrated on the fourth Thursday of each November, and considered the most family-oriented holiday, centered around a huge dinner eaten with relatives and close friends, at which roast and stuffed turkey, mashed potatoes, and pumpkin pie (the **turkey**, the **potato**, and the **pumpkin** all originate from North America) are compulsory elements of the menu.

The Pilgrims were followed by a much larger wave of Puritan immigration in 1630, who settled down in and around Boston, and ultimately gave New England its name and distinctive character. The **New England Puritans** have traditionally been considered a formative influence on American values and attitudes: their **Calvinist** faith, their religious devotion, their sense of duty and mission, and their insistence on the community have been inherited by later generations and shaped the national character. In the 20th century, a sermon of **John Winthrop**,[2] leader of the Boston Puritans in 1630, was rediscovered and became very famous as a summary of the sense of divine mission shared by the newcomers: he compared their enterprise to that of Moses and the Jews seeking the Promised Land. Perhaps the most famous quote of the sermon is when Winthrop compares the new settlers to a "**city upon a hill**, the eyes of all people are upon us"; in other words, the New England Puritans should set a righteous example to the rest of the Christian world. Winthrop's sermon is considered the earliest version of the idea of **American exceptionalism**: that the United States has come into being to fulfil a **divine mission**, to carry out God's plan in the New World.

The idealism, devotion and moral earnestness of the Puritans was combined with some other characteristics that make them less admirable for contemporary Americans: for

[2] *John Winthrop* (1587–1649): A wealthy landowner and lawyer from Suffolk, who led the 1630 emigration to Massachusetts, and served as the governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony for 14 years between 1630 and his death.

instance, they did not tolerate other kinds of Christians in New England for a long time, and enforced an excessively strict moral way of life in Puritan towns. Adultery was seen as a mortal sin, but drinking alcohol, dancing and merriment were also considered sinful pastimes. The modern American ideal of **religious freedom and tolerance** is rooted more in the mid-Atlantic colony of **Pennsylvania**, which was founded by **William Penn**,[3] member of a small Protestant religious minority, the Quakers (officially called the Society of Friends), and he welcomed all settlers regardless of national origin or religious background. The tiniest American state of **Rhode Island** in New England also came into being as a refuge from religious persecution, founded by a renegade Puritan, **Roger Williams**,[4] who was expelled from Massachusetts due to his unorthodox religious ideas, and he decided to offer a haven for people of all faiths.

For obvious reasons, modern Americans rarely look at the Southern colonies for positive historical examples: these colonies developed agricultural plantations, where they used black slaves as labor force, and the brutal exploitation of many generations of African Americans is the most glaring crime of the American historical past.

2.3. The American Revolution and the Founding Fathers

The increasingly autonomous American colonies[5] rebelled against the supremacy of the British Empire and fought successfully for their independence between 1775 and 1781, ultimately negotiating a peace treaty with the British by 1783. The **War of Independence**, better known as the **Revolutionary War** among Americans, was a formative experience of the new nation, which created the first national heroes (the

[3] *William Penn* (1644–1718): The son of a wealthy English admiral, he converted to Quaker faith at the age of 22, and became a champion of the small and persecuted English Protestant sect. In 1681, he secured from King Charles II a royal charter (in return for money the king owed to Penn's father) that made him the sole proprietor of Pennsylvania. Penn set out to establish a colony which would serve as a safe haven for all religious groups who were persecuted for their religious beliefs, including Quakers but also other small sects. His colony had full freedom of religion and the most democratic government at the time.

[4] *Roger Williams* (1603–1683): English Puritan minister and theologian, who came to Massachusetts in 1631, but was expelled in 1636 for his heterodox teachings, especially his insistence that individuals should be free to decide what religious tenets they believe in. He fled south, where he founded the town of Providence, which later became the colony of Rhode Island. He purchased the surrounding land from the local Native American tribe, and maintained good relations with them, even wrote a book about their language. He welcomed all kinds of religious groups at Providence, including Jews.

[5] At the outbreak of the War of Independence, there were 13 British colonies along the East Coast: Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, and New Hampshire in New England; New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey in the Mid-Atlantic; and Maryland, Delaware, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia in the South.

military and civilian leaders of the independence struggle) and the first symbols of the United States.

Two cities, Boston and Philadelphia are strongly associated with the War: **Boston** was the scene of the earliest hostilities between the colonial radicals and the British armed forces (see ch. 3.2. for more details), while **Philadelphia** hosted the Continental Congress, which acted as a decision-making body during and after the War, with delegates from all the colonies participating. The Continental Congress appointed **George Washington**[6] the **commander-in-chief** of the American armed forces, and the same body approved the **Declaration of Independence** on July 4, 1776, which announced that a new "United States of America" had been created out of the former colonies. This is the birthday of the country, celebrated each year on **Independence Day**, the other major 'home-grown' national holiday of the US. The first draft of the Declaration was written by **Thomas Jefferson,**[7] who became another celebrated early hero of the struggle for independence. The delegates who signed the original version of the Declaration of Independence – and more broadly, who have played a crucial role in the creation of the United States – have been called **Founding Fathers** by later generations of Americans.[8] The Continental Congress held its sessions in the building of the Pennsylvania state legislature, which was subsequently renamed **Independence Hall**. The large bell hung in the steeple of the building, which was originally used to call

[6] *George Washington* (1732–1799): Born into a wealthy Virginia planter family, he served in the British army during the French and Indian War between 1754 and 1758. A committed Patriot, he represented Virginia in the First Continental Congress in 1774 and was appointed commander-in-chief of the revolutionary army in 1775. He commanded the American forces until the final victory at Yorktown in 1781. He was invited to be the chairman of the Constitutional Convention in 1787 and was elected the first President under the new Constitution in 1789 without opposition. He decided to retire from the presidency at the end of his second term, in 1797. Both the federal capital and the northwestern state of Washington was named after him, but his surname also became a very popular first name among Americans.

[7] *Thomas Jefferson* (1743–1826): Born into a wealthy Virginia planter family, he studied at the College of William and Mary and became a lawyer. As one of the youngest delegates of the Continental Congress, he drafted the Declaration of Independence in 1776. Later, he played a pivotal role in the politics of the young state of Virginia. In 1784 he was sent to Paris to represent the United States until 1789, when Washington invited him to serve as Secretary of State in his first administration. He emerged as the leader of the new Democratic-Republican Party and was nominated as the party's presidential candidate in 1796, but lost against the Federalist candidate, John Adams. In 1800, he defeated Adams and became the third President of the US until 1809, when he voluntarily retired, following the example of Washington. Jefferson is considered one of the most brilliant and original minds of the early United States, who was an outstanding philosopher and architect as well as lawyer and politician.

[8] *Founding Fathers:* The term is actually a creation of the 20th century, and has an uncertain scope of meaning, since several key persons of the Revolutionary War – e.g. George Washington – were not present at the adoption of the Declaration of Independence. Also, the creation of the nation's constitution in 1787 is generally seen as a "second foundation" of the nation, so those who played a crucial role in that process are also included among the "Founding Fathers" (see below), e.g. James Madison or Alexander Hamilton. In the broadest sense, all those are entitled to be included in this group who played an active and crucial role either during the War of Independence or in the early years of the United States.

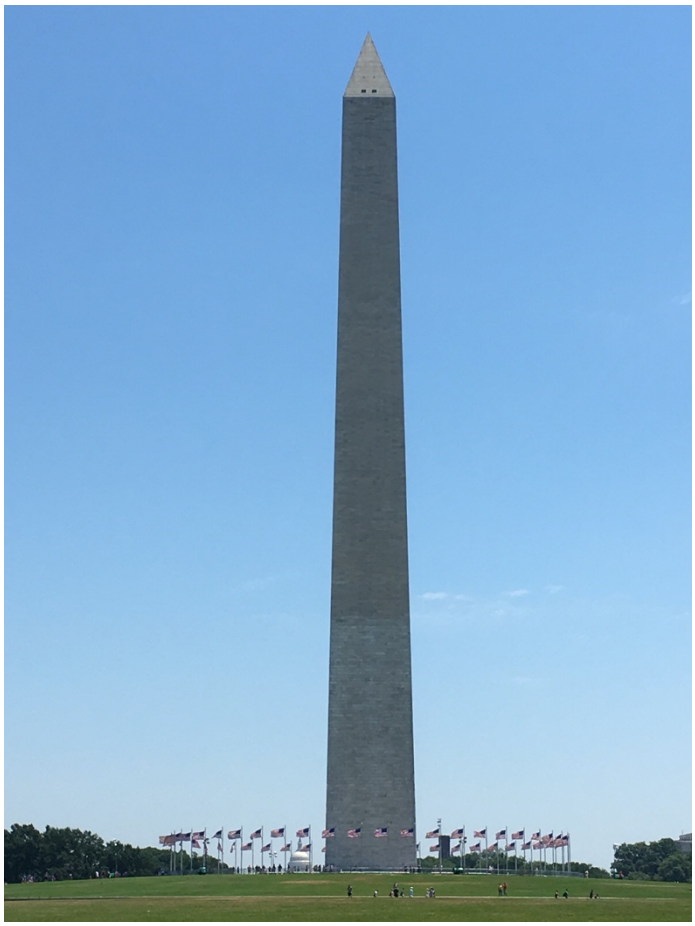
representatives to sessions, is now called **Liberty Bell**, and it is perhaps the most famous symbolic object from the revolutionary era.

More than a decade later, in the summer of 1787, Independence Hall hosted another crucial gathering of people: the members of the **Constitutional Convention** gathered here to plan a new legal framework for the still infant United States (more about the Convention in ch. 6.1). The chairman of the convention was George Washington, universally considered the most respected figure of the new country, but a Virginia delegate, **James Madison**[9] played the most crucial role in the drafting of the new document. After months of debate and deliberation, ultimately 39 people signed the accepted draft of the new Constitution: they are also referred to as Founding Fathers, or – in order to avoid confusion – **Framers**. Besides Madison, this group included Alexander Hamilton and Benjamin Franklin, among others.

The generation of the Founding Fathers exercised an enormous influence on subsequent American history, politics, and culture: they did not only create a new and independent nation but designed its most important political institutions (Congress, the President and the Supreme Court) that are still in existence today, and also added a list of civil rights to the Constitution which have served as reference for the definition of individual freedom in the United States ever since. Several of them were also elected Presidents, so they served as actual political leaders of the young nation. Their impact does not seem to diminish with the passing time: current political and cultural debates still often evoke the writings of one or another of the Founding Fathers in support of their argument, since these figures enjoy an almost universal adoration by Americans, and their thoughts and opinions are often considered to be a yardstick or a reference point for all later generations of Americans.[10]

[9] *James Madison* (1751–1836): Born into a wealthy Virginia planter family, he entered the politics of the state of Virginia during the Revolution as a close ally of Jefferson. In 1787, he was sent to the Constitutional Convention as a Virginia delegate and played a central role in the drafting of the Constitution. The next year, he was elected a Representative of the first Congress, and became the other main leader of the Democratic-Republican Party. After Jefferson's victory, Madison became Secretary of State in his administration, and succeeded him as the fourth President of the US between 1809 and 1817.

[10] Of course, "almost universal adoration" does not mean that some historians or political activists do not criticize certain views, deeds, or character flaws of the Founding Fathers. Most recently, especially as a consequence of the Black Lives Matter movement, former slaveowners like George Washington, Thomas Jefferson or James Madison came under fire, since they all derived their personal wealth from the forced labor of African Americans. Some radicals even demand the removal of their statues from various public places due to this fact, which has been widely known for over 200 years. The underlying question in all such historical debates is whether it is wise to judge people of past centuries by the very different standards of modern society, and whether historical figures should be seen in



The cult of the Founding Fathers is faithfully reflected by the **National Mall** in the center of the federal capital, Washington D.C., where major monuments were erected to the most famous of their generation: the **Washington Monument**,[11] the world's tallest obelisk at 169 m, and the Jefferson Memorial.

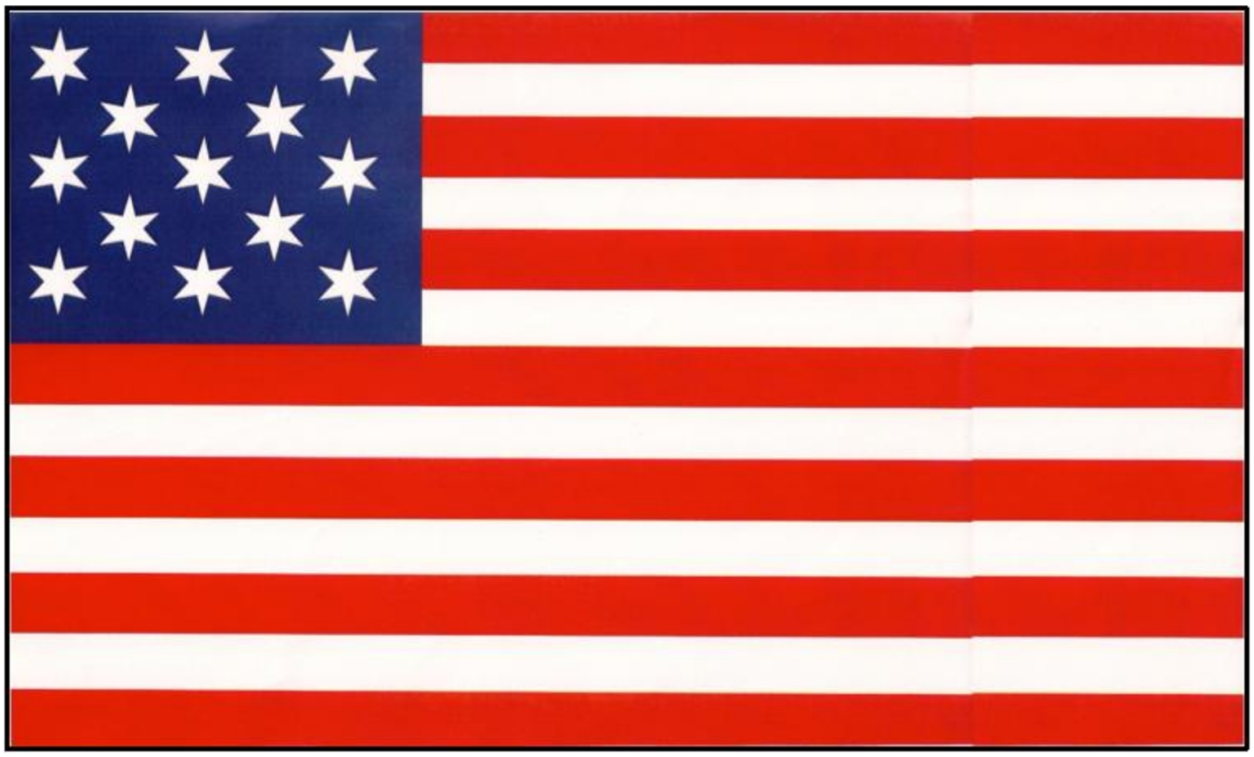
2.4. The American flag

Flags are among the most important and best-known symbols of every nation, but few national flags are held in such awe and enjoy an almost religious admiration as the flag of the United States. The flag was created during the War of Independence, and originally featured thirteen white and red horizontal stripes as well as thirteen small white stars in a blue field in the upper left corner. The number of stripes as well as the number of white stars were references to the number of the colonies, or new states, who joined the revolutionary struggle, while the colors were derived from the British flag (so ultimately, from the flags of England, Scotland, and Ireland, which had been combined in the Union Jack). It was adopted by the Continental Congress in 1777.

It also inspired the national anthem, entitled **"The Star-Spangled Banner"**, which was originally a poem written by Francis Scott Key in 1814, who witnessed the bombardment of Fort McHenry in the Baltimore harbor by the British navy during the British-American war, and observed with pride that the American flag continued to fly over the fortress. It was enacted by Congress as the official anthem of the US in 1931.

black-and-white terms, being either purely good or mostly evil, or they should be viewed as complex and contradictory characters, with merits as well as faults.

[11] Photo of Washington Monument by Károly Pintér



One version of the Revolutionary US flag

As the United States continued to grow during the next two centuries, and new states joined the Union, new white stars were constantly added to the blue field in the upper left corner to represent the status quo. So, the American flag is also unique in the sense that it has evolved during the history of the US, while preserving its fundamental structure. Since 1959, when Alaska and Hawaii joined the US, the number of five-pointed white stars on the flag has been 50:

The current flag of the United States (since 1959)

The flag did not always enjoy such a huge popularity among ordinary Americans as it does today: in the early 19th century, it was displayed mostly on government and military buildings and ships. The modern cult of the flag emerged during the **Civil War**[12] (1861–65), when the Northern troops fought for preserving the Union under the federal flag. After the war, veterans and other patriotic organizations began to promote the flag as the symbol of the unity and values of the US, especially among schoolchildren. In 1892, the first version of the modern **Pledge of Allegiance** to the flag was composed by Francis Bellamy, a Baptist minister and journalist, and it quickly became a standard morning routine in most American elementary and high schools. Children stand up, look at the flag while placing their right hand over their heart, and recite the following: "I pledge my allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."[13]

[12] *American Civil War* (1861–1865): The bloodiest military conflict of American history, which had far-reaching political, social, and cultural consequences. The root cause of the conflict was slavery, but the war broke out because 11 Southern slave-owning states did not accept the election of Abraham Lincoln, an anti-slavery Northerner, to the presidency in 1860, and broke away to form a new entity, the Confederate States of America. Lincoln declared the move a rebellion, and so the war began in April 1861. Ultimately the Union (that is, the Northern states that did not have slavery) won the war, the country was reunited, slavery was abolished, but the real social and political equality of the former black slaves was not achieved. The South suffered the economic and social consequences of the war for another century.

[13] The current text has been finalized and included in the U.S. Flag Code in 1954, and it is not identical with Bellamy's original text (the "under God" phrase was added in 1954, reflecting the anti-Communist spirit of the Cold

The flag became an omnipresent symbol of the US in the 20th century, especially after World War II, and many ceremonies are unimaginable without it. If members of the US military or law enforcement officers are killed in the line of duty, at the funeral their coffin is always covered with a flag, which one of their colleagues then folds in a triangular shape and hands it to the widow or some other member of the grieving family. On Memorial Day (last Monday of May) and Veterans Day (November 11), two national holidays to remember fallen soldiers of past wars, small flags are planted on military graves or just displayed in public spaces in remembrance. After the terror attacks destroyed the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, millions of ordinary Americans expressed their solidarity and support by hanging American flags on their home or in their backyard.

Flag display on the campus of Notre Dame University in Indiana (photo by Károly Pintér)

The omnipresent display of the US flag occasionally became an object of controversy, for example when young people in the 1960s and 70s began to use it as a pattern on their clothes (jackets, T-shirts, etc.), or when political demonstrators burned a flag as symbolic protest against certain policies of the federal government (this form of protest was first

War). The Supreme Court ruled in 1943 that children cannot be compelled to recite the Pledge if their religion or conscience does not allow them to do so.

used by the anti-Vietnam War movement). After several such legal cases, the US Supreme Court declared in 1990 that when the flag is burned or otherwise desecrated at a political demonstration, it should be seen as a form of "symbolic speech" and as such, it is protected by the principle of the freedom of speech laid down in the First Amendment of the Constitution, so flag burners in such cases cannot be prosecuted for any misdemeanor.

2.5. The Statue of Liberty

The **Statue of Liberty** is arguably one of the most familiar symbols of the United States all over the world. The Statue stands on Liberty Island in **New York Harbor**, just a short boat ride from downtown Manhattan. It depicts a robed female figure, the symbolic representation of the goddess of Liberty, who holds a torch in her raised right hand, while holding a tablet in her left, on which the date of Independence Day (July 4, 1776) is carved in Roman numerals. The statue is 46 m tall from the foot of the figure to the top of the torch, or 93 m together with the pedestal.

This world-famous statue, whose full name is "Liberty Enlightening the World", is not the creation of Americans: it was a gift of France to commemorate the 100th anniversary of American independence. Since France was the most important ally of the rebel colonies during the War of Independence, and also became a republic after 1870, the idea of brotherhood between the two nations have long prevailed. The statue was designed by French sculptor Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi, with the internal structure constructed by Gustave Eiffel. The construction of the gigantic bronze statue took several years to complete, and fund raising to build the pedestal (the responsibility of the American side) went slowly, therefore it was ultimately unveiled in 1886. It was the largest statue in the world at the time, and soon became a popular tourist attraction, since visitors were able to climb all the way to the statue's crown and (until 1916) even into her torch.

The statue became an international symbol and icon of the United States partly because its erection took place just before the second large immigrant wave, predominantly from Southern and Eastern Europe, hit the East Coast of the US in the next two decades. Millions of immigrants arrived predominantly at New York Harbor, and the first landmark of the New World they glimpsed after the lengthy sea voyage was the majestic Statue of Liberty. A few years later, in 1892, a screening station for immigrants was opened on neighboring **Ellis Island**, which became the primary port of entry for foreigners until it was closed in 1954 (for details of this period of immigration history, see ch. 4.4).

The Statue of Liberty (photo by Károly Pintér)

In the American collective memory, Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty are both closely associated with a formative period of the modern United States, which significantly altered the ethnic make-up of American society by the arrival of an estimated 60 million Italian, Jewish, Polish and other Eastern and Southern European immigrants, most of whom trace their family history back to the screening station where they were first confronted with American immigration authorities. For these people, the Statue of Liberty embodied a promise that primarily attracted them to the New World: the promise of greater freedom, more opportunities, a higher standard of living, in short: **the American Dream**.

The Statue of Liberty (left) and Ellis Island (right) seen from the top of One World Trade Center in Lower Manhattan (photo by Károly Pintér)

2.6. Land of the Free

The title of this subchapter is a quote from the national anthem of the US, which ends with this famous line: "O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave". The association of the United States of America with the idea of freedom is as old as the country itself: the 13 British colonies rebelled against the mother country to defend their 'freedom' (in that particular case, mostly their freedom from taxation). The opening part of the Declaration of Independence, written in 1776 as the "birth document" of the United States, contains some of the most famous lines of American history:

> We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

2.6.1. Individual liberty and the frontier experience

Liberty can be understood in many different ways, but in the American tradition, it is primarily interpreted as **individual liberty**, or the freedom of any person to live their

life the way they prefer and shape their own destiny according to their will. The distinctly American concept of liberty had several sources: it was inspired by such English philosophers as **John Locke**,[14] one of the founders of classical **liberalism**, who argued that each person possesses natural rights, and the government should be based on the consent of the governed. But it was also rooted in the practical experience of generations of **pioneers**, who came to a new, unknown land and had to survive mostly by relying on their own talents and resources at the **frontier**,[15] the edge of the territories settled by white Europeans. Frontier territories offered free or very cheap land for farming or grazing, huge forests for logging, but they also attracted adventurous people with the promise of finding gold or other precious metals, or criminals and bandits who exploited the lack of law and order. The frontier functioned also as an escape route for people who felt unhappy with their life or status in society, and it encouraged internal migration as well as immigration from abroad.

The frontier became a symbol of the American experience: people living on the frontier were tough, **self-reliant**, and **egalitarian**, often described as "**rugged individualists**", which encouraged a spirit of democracy and tolerance, in contrast to eastern states with their hierarchical societies and larger differences of wealth. The last phase of the history of the western American frontier (roughly from the 1860s to the 1890s) is better known as the '**Wild West**', and it has developed into an enduring American myth thanks to countless western novels and movies popularizing the stories of fierce **cowboys** on horseback, their clashes with "Indians" (Native Americans) or bandits.

[14] *John Locke* (1632–1704): English philosopher, often referred to as the "Father of Liberalism", who, in his *Two Treatises of Government* (1689), laid down the concept of natural rights and the consent of the governed as a crucial condition to legitimate government, which he cast into the theory of the "social contract" between the government and the people. He was also a major figure in empiricism, who proposed a modern conception of the self, and a supporter of religious tolerance.

[15] *frontier*: In 19th-century English, the term meant an uncertain and constantly moving line separating 'civilization' (areas settled by whites) from the 'wilderness' (territories still predominantly populated by Native Americans). Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, the frontier was moving westward from the East Coast as white settlers occupied new land, established farms and towns, and ultimately created new states to join the US. The frontier crossed the Mississippi River roughly in the 1820s, and the Rocky Mountains in the 1850s. After the foundation of California in 1850, a western frontier emerged as well, moving eastward into the vast forests and deserts of the American West. Following the census of 1890, the frontier was declared to have ceased to exist, but the last two states of the Continental US, Arizona and New Mexico, joined the Union only in 1912.

2.6.2. Economic liberalism: free market and free competition

The American idea of freedom and liberalism is reflected in several other fundamental aspects of the United States, for instance the almost universal belief in and support for the **free market** and **free economic competition** as the most beneficial system to provide both opportunity for individual success and the widest supply of goods and services for customers. The young United States was arguably the first liberal **capitalist** nation in the world, as it never had a hereditary nobility like European countries (although it had a wealthy landowning class, especially in the South), and it was free from the remnants of feudalism that hindered the free market and free competition in the "Old World". Although the emergence of huge and dominant **corporations** (trusts) and monopolies from the 1890s raised questions about whether 'free competition' still exists in America, the federal government in the 20th century passed laws to break up trusts and maintain competition at the free market, while also protecting **customers** from being exploited by powerful companies.

The widespread American belief in the superiority and benefits of free-market capitalism explains several characteristic American attitudes and convictions: for instance, Americans long resisted the intervention of the government (both state and federal) into the free market, and even after government regulation of monopolies and protection of customers came to be accepted as necessary in the early 20th century, many Americans continued to believe that the 'meddling' of politicians in economic matters is more harmful than useful: the "invisible hand of the free market" takes care of economic problems more effectively than government bureaucrats. The ubiquitous belief in the blessings of the free market explains why there is still no universal government-funded **health care** in the US: about 40% all Americans still think that health care is an individual responsibility, so people should buy their own **health insurance**. Also, Americans generally do not like to pay high **taxes** and they often justify this by arguing that high taxation restrains the economic freedom of private individuals and companies, while the government uses **taxpayer**s' money inefficiently and wastefully.

The deep American belief in the superiority of free-market capitalism can also be detected in American culture, in which successful business leaders are celebrated as flesh-and blood manifestations of the American Dream, benefiting from **equality of opportunity** provided by American economic and social conditions. Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, Jeff Bezos,

Elon Musk[16] and many others are seen as American heroes, outstanding examples of the old myth of the American "**self-made man**", a person who becomes rich, famous, and successful as a result of his (rarely her) own hard work, determination, and creativity.

2.6.3. Political freedom: democracy and distrust of government

The famous quote from the Declaration of Independence at the beginning of this subchapter contained two equally powerful statements: that all people are created equal and all have the right to be free. Individual freedom is obviously not possible if somebody is oppressed by other, more powerful people, so freedom in a political sense has been strongly associated with **political equality** from the beginning of the USA. This idea was reflected by the strongly symbolic rule of the Constitution that no titles of nobility are recognized in America, so nobody possesses an inherent privilege due to his family origins. In the late 18th century, when all European countries were still ruled by kings and aristocrats, that was a radically democratic gesture by the Framers.

The legal equality of white men was achieved relatively quickly in the US, since most of them received the right to vote by 1850s in the various states,[17] so the country could claim with some justification to be the largest **democracy** in the world. The French liberal aristocrat, Alexis de Tocqueville, wrote his famous book entitled *Democracy in America* in 1835 after visiting the young United States, because he was deeply impressed by the democratic spirit of the new nation across the Atlantic. The essence of the American idea of democratic government was succinctly summarized by **Abraham Lincoln** in his famous **Gettysburg Address**[18] as "government of the people, by the people, for the

[16] Bill Gates (born 1955) is the co-founder and former long-standing CEO (chief executive officer) of Microsoft Corporation; Steve Jobs (1955–2011) was the co-founder and CEO of Apple Corporation; Jeff Bezos (born 1964) is the founder and chairman of Amazon; while Elon Musk (born 1971 in South Africa) is the founder and CEO of Tesla and SpaceX.

[17] The original US Constitution did not define who has the right to vote at federal elections, essentially leaving the regulation of voting rights to the states, partly because state laws differed significantly in this matter. Constitutional amendments in the late 19th and 20th century laid down certain principles in voting rights: they predominantly banned discrimination against certain groups of Americans on the basis of race, color, sex, or tax-paying ability. But there are still no uniform voting right laws for all Americans in the 21st century.

[18] *Gettysburg address:* One of the most famous speeches of American history, delivered by Abraham Lincoln in November 1863, when he dedicated the site of the largest battle of the Civil War as a national cemetery. In his remarkably short address, Lincoln cited the now-famous lines of the Declaration of Independence (qouted above) and framed the Civil War as a continuation of the Founding Fathers' struggle for liberty and democratic government. For the full text, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gettysburg_Address

people": that is, a government elected by the entire nation, where anybody can be elected to political office and those who govern use their powers to improve the life of all citizens.

Despite all the talk about freedom and equality in American public life, individual liberty was far from guaranteed to all people in the 19th-century United States: the majority of African Americans remained slaves until the end of the Civil War (slavery was finally abolished in 1865), and even after they became freedmen, they suffered from various forms of legal and social discrimination until the 1960s. They were not the only group to experience the 'dark side' of American liberty: some of the Native Americans did not receive American citizenship until 1924, and women were also not politically equal to men until 1920, when they were given the right to vote by constitutional amendment.

Despite such flaws of American liberty and equality, the country gained an international fame as the "country of freedom" as well as the country of unlimited opportunities, and this reputation kept attracting immigrants (mostly from Europe, but also from East Asia) throughout the 19th and early 20th century (see the previous ch. 2.5 and 4.4). Defending freedom was a crucial American slogan during World War II against the oppressive regimes of Germany and Japan, as well as during the Cold War, when the United States and its allies faced another dictatorial power, the Soviet Union and its communist satellite states.

In a political context, 'freedom' has two significantly different meanings for most Americans: on the one hand, most of them are convinced that their country is "the freest in the world" due to its **liberal democratic system of government**, and they are very proud of the Constitution which enshrines these political principles. Therefore, defending the Constitution (and thereby the democratic American government) against all potential dangers is a fundamental principle on both sides of American politics, even if Democrats and Republicans often mean very different things under what "defending the Constitution" means in practice. Because of the near-sacred reverence of the Constitution among the American public, socialism or any other revolutionary ideology which would have threatened with the overthrow of the established order had very limited appeal and popularity in the United States; the terms "communism" or "socialism" still have a very negative ring especially among conservative Americans as ideologies opposed to individual political freedom.

On the other hand, Americans are strongly aware of their rights as American citizens, freedom rights guaranteed by the Constitution (mostly by the Bill of Rights; for details,

see ch. 7), and they are ready to protect these rights even against their own government if necessary. In fact, examples of the deep-seated **distrust of the government** (especially the federal government) abound throughout American history. The Founding Fathers had lengthy debates about how to guarantee that the new federal government created by the Constitution would not become an oppressive power (and they ultimately invented the current structure of checks and balances to prevent that; see ch. 7); member states repeatedly complained about the interference of the federal government into what they considered were state powers and even "rebelled"[19] against federal authority once, which resulted in the Civil War; thousands of individual Americans go to court each year to protest against a perceived offense against their civil rights by federal laws, departments, or government agencies. Such suspicion against a huge and all-too-powerful federal government manifests itself in multiple ways, e.g. when **whistle-blowers**[20] publish stolen secret government documents to reveal how federal government agencies illegally collect data about American citizens or commit other illegal acts; or when Americans refuse to pay more taxes arguing that their money is only going to be wasted by federal bureaucrats rather than spent wisely and usefully; or when American gun owners claim they have an individual right to own guns in order to protect themselves against a potentially oppressive federal government. Millions of Americans believe the old slogan that "the government that governs least governs best", and they tend to view any government-run project with suspicion. This general American mentality spills into American culture as well, e.g. many American movies and TV series portray shady manipulations by government agencies, and the widespread popularity of outlandish **conspiracy theories** also typically feature the government as an evil power.

2.7. Key Terms and Concepts

American Dream

American exceptionalism

[19] I put "rebelled" in quotation marks to recognize the fact that the US Constitution did not explicitly forbid the secession of states from the Union, so whether the formation of the Confederacy of the Southern states in 1861 was in fact a rebellion is not beyond dispute; there are a number of Southerners who still disagree with this interpretation and refer to the Civil War as the "War between the States" or even the "War of Southern Independence".

[20] *whistle-blower*: a person who informs the authorities or the larger public about some illegal activities taking place at a private company or a government agency. Strictly speaking, a whistle-blower usually commits an illegal act by leaking company secrets or publishing confidential documents, but they are provided legal immunity if these documents reveal large-scale illegal activities by organizations.

Boston
Calvinist
capitalist / capitalism
Civil War
"city upon a hill"
colonies / colonial period
commander-in-chief
conspiracy theory
Constitution
Constitutional Convention
corn
corporation
cowboys
customer
Declaration of Independence
democracy
distrust of government
divine mission
egalitarian
Ellis Island
equality of opportunity
Founding Fathers
Framers
free (economic) competition
free market
frontier
Gettysburg Address
health care
health insurance
Independence Day
Independence Hall
individual liberty
Jefferson, Thomas
liberalism
liberal democracy / democratic
Liberty Bell
Lincoln, Abraham
Locke, John
Madison, James
National Mall
New England
New York Harbor
Penn, William
Pennsylvania
Philadelphia
Pilgrims
pioneers
Pledge of Allegiance
political equality
potato
pumpkin
Puritans
religious freedom / tolerance
Rhode Island
rugged individualist
self-made man
self-reliant / self-reliance
"Star-Spangled Banner"
Statue of Liberty
taxes / taxation
taxpayer
Thanksgiving
turkey
War of Independence / Revolutionary War
Washington Monument
Washington, George
whistle-blower
Wild West
Williams, Roger
Winthrop, John

3. Cultural regions of the US

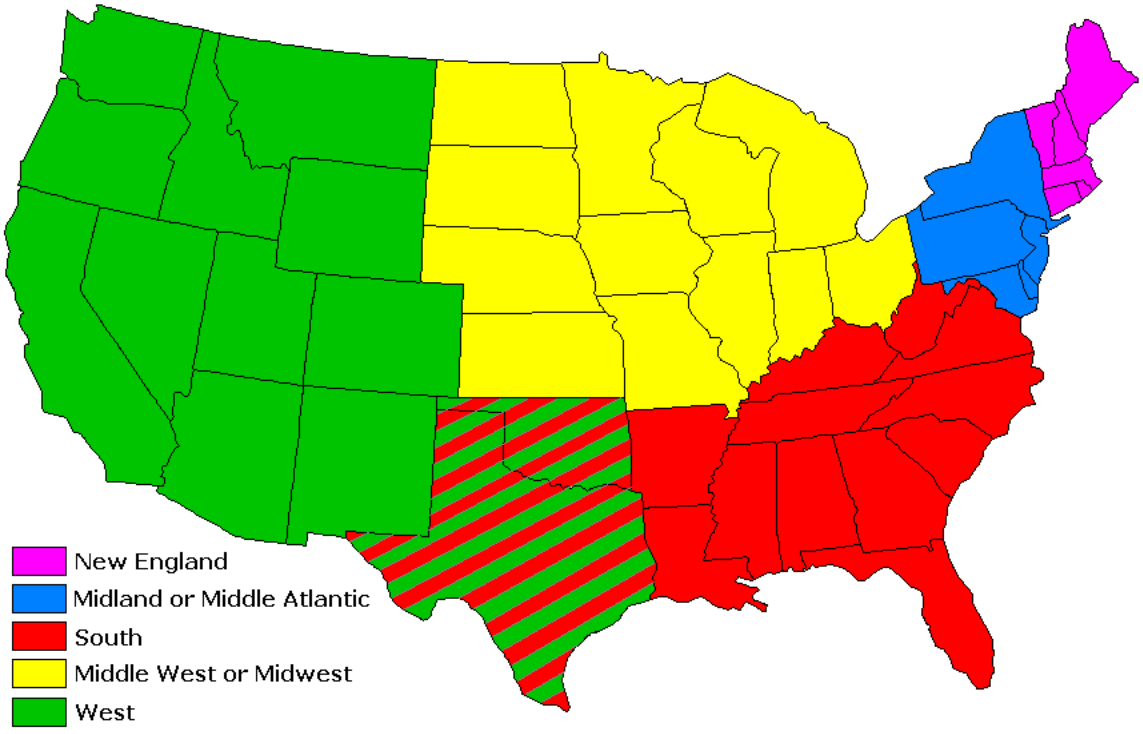
3.1. The idea of cultural regions

The territory of the US can be divided into regions on the basis of several different features: landforms, watersheds, climate, soil, vegetation, etc. These natural features of the land provide the basis of the cultural geography of the US, which also divides the country into larger and smaller regions. But the **cultural regions** are not distinguished primarily by nature, but rather by the different history, the settlement patterns, the economic features, degree of urbanization, the ethnic origin of the inhabitants, and other features of cultural geography. In short, the cultural regions of the US are different because the activities of humans have modified their different natural features in a variety of ways.

Cultural regions are more difficult to define and outline on a map than physiographic regions, because there are often as many similarities between neighboring areas as there are differences, so distinction between two regions is always relative. Some scholars distinguish 4 main regions; others 5, 8 or even 10. For example, Virginia and Louisiana are both considered Southern states, yet there are several features that distinguish them from each other, while several smaller regions could be outlined within each state. There is also disagreement about the boundaries of each region because transitional zones are always present. In the following, we would like to follow the regional division of one of the most famous American cultural geographers, Wilbur Zelinsky, who distinguished 5 principal culture areas within the US:

1. **New England,**
2. **the Middle Atlantic,**
3. **the South,**
4. **the Middle West or Midwest**, and
5. **the West**.

Other widespread approaches combine New England and the Middle Atlantic into a larger region called **Northeast** or subdivide the West into several smaller regions (e.g Northwest and Southwest, or Pacific West, Mountain West, and Desert West). All these approaches have their use and validity, and in the description of each region, the existence of distinct subregions will be noted.



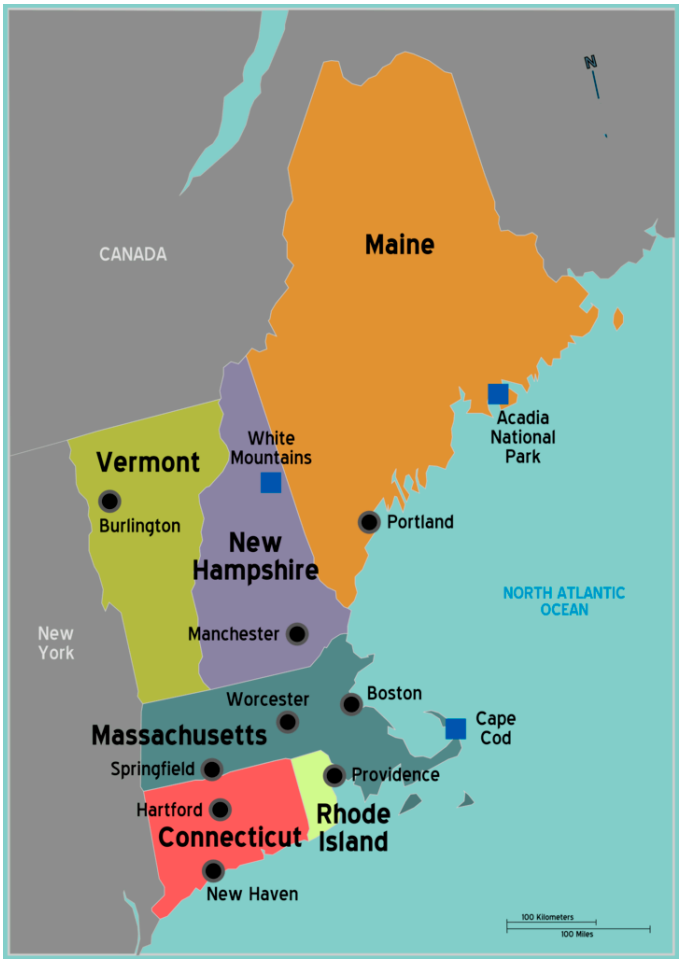
(Map created by the Nándor Fodor)

3.2. New England

New England is the smallest cultural region of the present US: it occupies the northeastern corner of the country, and consists of the states of **Massachusetts**, Connecticut, Rhode Island (the smallest state of the US by territory), New Hampshire, Vermont, and Maine (the northeastern 'corner' of the USA). It is bordered by New York state on the west, Canada on the north, and the Atlantic Ocean on the south and east (see map[21] below). It has a long and rugged coastline, with many good natural harbors, while

[21] Source of map: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map-USA-New_England01.png

the inland areas are mostly hilly, originally covered with dense forests. There are few big cities in the region, except for **Boston**, capital of Massachusetts, and the historical, commercial and cultural center of the whole region.



New England is one of the oldest regions of the country. Its origins go back to the arrival of the first **Puritan** settlers, the so-called **Pilgrims**,[22] aboard the ship Mayflower at Cape Cod, the coast of today's Massachusetts in 1620 (see also ch. 2.2.). The great majority of people who settled this area were English Protestants, whose **Calvinist** version of Protestantism was suppressed and persecuted by the **Anglican** government of England. Therefore, some of the Puritans left England for the American colonies to practice their religion freely. The name of the region reflects the fact that this area remained for a long time ethnically homogeneous and culturally similar to England, but it also expressed the hope of the early settlers that they would be able to create a new, better version of their homeland in the New World.

The character of New England has been shaped by the Puritans: they settled in small, self-governing communities, in which town leaders and church elders were elected and public issues were discussed and decided at town meetings. Although they did not tolerate other

[22] *Pilgrims* (earlier also *Pilgrim Fathers*): The first group of Puritan settlers who decided to emigrate from England to Virginia but landed in present-day New England instead in 1620. They sailed from Plymouth, England, aboard the ship Mayflower, and established a settlement they also named Plymouth on Cape Cod, in today's Massachusetts. They arrived in December and survived the harsh winter with great difficulties; therefore it was crucial for them to grow enough food for the next winter. The local Indians showed them how to grow corn, a native American plant, and in late 1621, they invited the Indians to a joint feast to celebrate the good harvest. That is the origin of the Thanksgiving holiday in the US (about the holiday, see also ch. 2.2).

religious groups at first, by the late 18th century democratic rights were extended to most residents. The spirit of religious devotion, democracy, and the strong sense of community are considered Puritan legacies in American culture.

Since the climate of the region is rather cold and the soil is rocky and poor, self-sufficient farms were not prosperous, and New Englanders soon began to deal with shipbuilding, manufacturing, and trade. By the time of the American Revolution, they earned the nickname **Yankee**, a word of uncertain origin that was associated with hard work, thrift, ingenuity, a good business sense and occasionally craftiness. The Yankee peddler and storekeeper became popular folklore figures in colonial America, and Yankee values came to be epitomized by the Boston-born **Benjamin Franklin**,[23] the famous printer, publisher, inventor, and politician, one of the authors of the US Constitution, who in his *Autobiography* emphasized the values of industry and frugality as the way to his fame and fortune.

New England and particularly Boston played a very important part in the **American Revolution**, since local merchants resented British taxes and limitations on colonial trade very strongly. The **Boston Tea Party**[24] in late 1773 triggered the armed conflict between Britain and the colonies, and the first shots were also fired outside Boston in 1775. New Englander **John Adams**[25] became the 2nd President of the US in 1796.

In the early 19th century, New England became the first region to industrialize, and Boston developed into a national commercial and financial center, attracting many immigrants, especially Irish and later Italians. New England has always been the educational center of

[23] *Benjamin Franklin* (1706–1790): born into a Boston Puritan artisan family of modest means, he learned the printing trade and moved to Philadelphia to make a career. He started publishing a newspaper, into which he also wrote articles, and became both famous and successful via publishing *Poor Richard's Almanack*, a very popular collection of stories, proverbs, and homely wisdom. He was also a self-taught scientist and inventor, whose most famous invention was the lightning rod. He was an enthusiastic American Patriot during the War of Independence and also participated in the drafting of the Constitution in 1787.

[24] *Boston Tea Party* (December 1773): An act of protest by Boston patriots, who considered it an anti-American measure that the British East India Company can sell tea in the colonies tax-free, whereas the colonial merchants must pay a heavy tax, therefore they attacked three merchant ships full of tea (disguised as Indians) and threw their cargo into the sea. This was considered an act of rebellion by the British government and triggered the War of Independence.

[25] *John Adams* (1735–1826): born into a Puritan family of modest means in Massachusetts, he studied at Harvard and became a lawyer. In the 1760s, he became an enthusiastic Patriot, was elected to the Continental Congress during the War of Independence, participated in drafting the Declaration of Independence, represented the US in France and Holland, and negotiated the peace treaty with Britain in 1783. He was elected the first Vice-President under George Washington, and after he retired from politics, Adams won the first competitive presidential election as the candidate of the Federalist Party in 1796. Four years later, he was defeated by Thomas Jefferson and retired from politics.

the nation, because the Puritans put a strong emphasis on education: they wanted all people to be able to read the Bible and expected ministers to be well-educated. As a result, the oldest and most prestigious universities have been founded here, including **Harvard**, in 1636, and **Yale**, in 1701 (more about them in ch. 13). This region produced many of the most famous American writers and intellectuals of the 19th century, including **Nathaniel Hawthorne**,[26] who wrote several stories on the life of early Puritan settlers, or the philosopher-essayists **Ralph Waldo Emerson**[27] and **Henry David Thoreau**.[28] The strong religious values of New Englanders expressed themselves in support for social reforms such as the temperance movement against alcoholic drinks, or the abolition of slavery.

During the 20th century, New England gradually lost its earlier pre-eminence in business and politics, but it remained influential due to its excellent education and vibrant cultural life. Many of the country's recent leaders have been educated at one of the elite universities of New England, and Massachusetts-born **John F. Kennedy**[29] became the first Catholic President of the US in 1960. The Kennedy clan is closely associated with the late 20th-century history of the country, since two of his younger brothers, Robert and Edward, also played a national political role.

3.3. Middle Atlantic

This region, as the name suggests, is between two very different regions, New England and the South. Out of these, it shares more cultural similarities with New England, but it

[26] *Nathaniel Hawthorne* (1804–1864): American novelist and short story writer, generally considered one of the greatest 19th century American writers. His most famous novel, *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), is a story taking place in a Puritan community in colonial New England.
[27] *Ralph Waldo Emerson* (1803–1882): American essayist and philosopher, who was the leading figure of the transcendentalist movement in 19th century American culture. Several of his essays are considered cornerstones of American cultural history.
[28] *Henry David Thoreau* (1817–1862): American essayist and philosopher, member of the transcendentalist movement, whose fame rests mostly on two very influential works: his book *Walden* (1854), in which he recorded his experiences and thoughts while living outside civilization, and his essay "Civil Disobedience" (1849), in which he argued that a citizen has a right to disobey an unjust government.
[29] *John Fitzgerald Kennedy* (1917–1963): Born in Massachusetts to a wealthy Irish Catholic family, he was first elected a Representative (1946), then a Senator of Massachusetts in 1952, and ultimately won the presidential election in 1960, becoming the first Catholic elected to the highest leadership. His victory was seen as a symbolic transition of power to a younger generation, since Kennedy was also the youngest elected president at the age of 43. He was assassinated by a sniper in 1963 and was mourned by the whole nation. The identity of his murderer is still considered a mystery by many Americans.

is set apart by its different social and political history. It consists of the states of **New York**, **Pennsylvania**, New Jersey, Delaware, and Maryland. It is bordered by Lake Eire, Lake Ontario, the St. Lawrence River and Canada on the north, New England on the northeast, the Atlantic Ocean on the east, the Midwestern state of Ohio on the west and the Southern states of Virginia and West Virginia on the south (see map below).[30]

Unlike New England, the Middle Atlantic area was never homogeneous in nationality or religion: in fact, some of the first settlers of this region did not come from England. **New York City** on the mouth of the **Hudson River** was founded by the Dutch under the name New Amsterdam; the first settlements along the Delaware River were established by Swedes. Pennsylvania was founded by a wealthy English Quaker, **William Penn** (see also ch. 2.2), but much of it was settled by Protestant German groups seeking religious freedom. As a result, the Mid-Atlantic region became far more varied than either New England or the South: it has always had a great variety of ethnic groups, religions and economic activities. The two largest cities of the region, New York and Philadelphia, became prosperous as the largest ports as well as business and commercial centers of the English colonies by the late 18th century. Therefore, they have attracted huge numbers of foreign immigrants all through their history. Territories further west, however, remained rural and agricultural (like upstate New York or eastern Pennsylvania), while other areas like western Pennsylvania or New Jersey became heavily industrialized during the 19th century: for example, Pittsburgh became the center of American iron and steel industry, drawing on nearby coal mines.

Philadelphia, which was the largest city of the nation until New York overtook it in the early 19th century, played a vital role in the early history of the United States, as it hosted the first gathering of the representatives of the rebellious colonies, the Continental

[30] Source of map: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/0c/Map-USA-Mid_Atlantic01.svg

Congress, from 1774 to 1781, and therefore the **Declaration of Independence** was also adopted here in 1776. The **Constitutional Convention**, which drafted the fundamental law of the United States, also met in Philadelphia in 1787 (see also ch. 2.3).

By the late 20th century, the coastal part of the Middle Atlantic states became the most densely populated region in the whole United States: there is practically a continuous string of cities and suburbs all the way from the Virginian suburbs of **Washington D.C.** (located between Maryland and Virginia) up to New York City and beyond to the northern suburbs of Boston, including such cities as Baltimore (Maryland) and Philadelphia. In the continuous process of **urbanization**, which involved migration from all other parts of the United States, individual differences between cities and regions have become relatively small and insignificant: some authors prefer to consider New England and the Middle Atlantic together as one single, heavily urbanized region under such names as the **Northeast**, the **East Coast** or Megalopolis. Nevertheless, differences in history and immigration still justify the separation of this larger area into two regions.

New York is the largest city not only of the region, but the whole US, with more than 7 million people living within its 5 boroughs (Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens, the Bronx, and Staten Island), and some 20 million in the larger **metropolitan area** around the city. It is perhaps the biggest center of world finance and business: the name of **Wall Street**,[31] where the New York Stock Exchange is, stands for American finance in general. It is also an American capital of culture, home of the largest publisher firms, the most prestigious theaters (one of the oldest streets in Manhattan, **Broadway**, became a synonym for American theater), several world-famous museums, **Columbia University**, and the headquarters of national radio and television networks. The island of **Manhattan**, the oldest and central part of New York, is among the most famous places in the world: its huge skyscrapers and the large green rectangle of the **Central Park** tucked in among them, are easily recognizable for most people in in the world. It is a city of extraordinary diversity, the largest mixture of immigrants in the country. It is also a city of extremes: elegant and expensive hotels, apartment houses, restaurants and shops coexist with huge slums, abandoned buildings, lots of homeless and addicted people.

[31] *Wall Street*: A relatively small street in lower Manhattan, close to the southern edge of the island, which became world famous because the New York Stock Exchange is located here, and several other major financial institutions are nearby, so the name of the street is a metonym for the American financial services industry.

Northward view of the island of Manhattan from its southern tip, the observation floor of the One World Trade Center, with the Hudson River to the left and the East River (and Brooklyn) to the right (photo by Károly Pintér)

New York has given many famous people to the US, including one of the greatest political dynasties, the Roosevelts, whose origins go back to colonial Dutch settlers. Two members of the family, **Theodore Roosevelt**[32] (1901–09) and **Franklin D. Roosevelt**[33] (1933–45) became presidents. Famous writers from the region include the 19th-century classic James Fenimore Cooper (whose Leatherstocking tales mostly take place in upstate New York) as well as several 20th-century authors. But arguably the most famous New Yorker

[32] *Theodore Roosevelt* (1858–1919): Born into a large and wealthy New York family with Dutch origins, he first entered politics in New York State as a Republican. He rose to national fame when he volunteered to organize and lead a cavalry unit in Cuba during the Spanish-American War in 1898, and President William McKinley chose him as his running mate for the 1900 presidential election. In 1901, McKinley was shot by an anarchist and died, and Roosevelt became president. He was the first Progressive president in American history, who carried out important social reforms, while pursuing an aggressively imperialist foreign policy. In 1909 he stepped down, but in 1912 he decided to run again unsuccessfully for the presidency, competing against the official Republican president, William Taft. Their rivalry helped Democrat Woodrow Wilson win the presidency.

[33] *Franklin Delano Roosevelt* (1882–1945): A distant cousin of Theodore, he was also born and raised in upstate New York. He joined the Democratic administration of Woodrow Wilson during World War I, became the vice-presidential candidate of the party in 1920, but in 1921 contracted polio, which paralyzed him from the waist down. After struggling for years unsuccessfully to find a cure, he learned to stand and even make a few steps while wearing iron braces on his legs, but lived the rest of his life in a wheelchair. In 1932, he returned to politics and won the presidential election, promising to fight actively against the catastrophic economic and social consequences of the Great Depression. His New Deal program made him very popular, and he was reelected to the presidency three more times. He died soon after his fourth victorious election, in April 1945, shortly before the victorious conclusion of World War II.

in the world is comedian, writer, actor, and film director **Woody Allen**,[34] who made several famous movies successfully capturing the unique spirit of the "Big Apple".

3.4. The South

The South is perhaps the most distinctive region of the US. Its name is misleading: it is not the southern but only the southeastern part of the US, stretching from **Virginia** to **Florida** in the south along the East Coast, and to **Texas** in the west along the **Gulf of Mexico**. Its identity comes from history: it includes those states that maintained **slavery** as a legal institution and established their economic and social life on it. As a result, the South came into conflict with the North in the first half of the 19th century, and this conflict led to the outbreak of the **Civil War**[35] (1861–65). The defeat of the South in the war resulted in a long period of economic depression, social problems, and feelings of persistent hostility towards the rest of the US, which increased the difference of Southern culture even more. The South began to reintegrate into the US only in the second half of the 20th century.

Its boundaries are not always easy to define: there were 15 slave-owning states in 1861,[36] but only 12 of them are considered by geographers part of the modern South: Maryland in the northeast and Missouri in the northwest do not share most cultural features with the South today, while the western part of Texas was not yet settled at the time of the Civil War, therefore the inclusion of Texas as a whole is doubtful. That leaves Virginia, West

[34] *Woody Allen* (born 1935): Born Allan Stewart Konigsberg in New York City, he grew up in a Jewish neighborhood in Brooklyn. He started writing jokes and comic skits for various comedians already as a teenager, then became a stand-up comedian himself in the 1960s. In the late 60s he started writing comic theatre plays and directed his first movie in 1969. His romantic comedy *Annie Hall*, which he both directed and starred in, won the Academy Award in 1977. Allen has written and directed over 40 movies and continues to be active in his 80s. His quirky, ironic sense of humor and intellectual sophistication has made him more popular among Europeans and intellectuals than the wide American audience.

[35] *American Civil War* (1861–1865): The bloodiest military conflict of American history, which had far-reaching political, social, and cultural consequences. The root cause of the conflict was slavery, but the war broke out because 11 Southern slave-owning states did not accept the election of Abraham Lincoln, an anti-slavery Northerner, to the presidency in 1860, and broke away to form a new entity, the Confederate States of America. Lincoln declared the move a rebellion, and so the war began in April 1861. Ultimately the Union (that is, the Northern states that did not have slavery) won the war, the country was reunited, slavery was abolished, but the real social and political equality of the former black slaves was not achieved. The South suffered the economic and social consequences of the war for another century.

[36] In fact, there were only 14, since Virginia still included West Virginia: the hilly western part became a separate state in 1863, encouraged of the Lincoln administration.

Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, North and South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana and Arkansas in the South. The most widely accepted boundaries of the South are the following: it is bordered by the Atlantic Ocean on the east, the Gulf of Mexico on the south, the Middle Atlantic states of Pennsylvania and Maryland on the northeast, and the **Ohio River** on the north, separating it from the eastern Midwest. West of the Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas and the eastern part of Texas (roughly the territory east of the Dallas–Houston line) belong to the South (see map below).[37]

Such a huge region obviously has certain differences as well as a general similarity. The oldest part of the region is the Chesapeake Bay area, primarily the coastal part of Virginia,

[37] Source of map: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map-USA-South01.png The map erroneously does not mark Florida as part of the South, but it evidently is, and also leaves the whole of Texas out of the region.

where the first English settlers arrived in 1607 and founded the city of **Jamestown**.[38] The hot, subtropical climate and the good soil made the area highly suitable for farming, and plantation agriculture quickly developed. **Plantations** were large estates of land cultivated by many servants and later slaves, typically producing one single kind of crop to be sold for cash. The earliest cash crops were tobacco, rice, and sugar cane, but in the early 19th century, **cotton** because the most popular plant in the South. Wealthy Virginia planters **George Washington**, **Thomas Jefferson** and **James Madison** played a crucial role in the American Revolution, and subsequently all became presidents (for details about them, see ch. 2.2).

A cotton plant ready for picking in Texas (photo by Károly Pintér)

As white settlements moved westward in the early 19th century, cotton plantations spread westward with them. This part of the South, the fertile coastal plain along the Gulf of Mexico from **South Carolina** to **Louisiana**, came to be called the **Deep South** or the Lowland South. The majority of the black population of the US is still concentrated in the Deep South. Further north, in the southern part of the Appalachians, the soils were poorer and the climate cooler, not suitable for plantations. In this area, small family farms were established producing grain and dairy, raising livestock, using few or no slaves. This area, ranging from West Virginia to Kentucky, Tennessee and Arkansas, is called the **Upland South**. They had little economic interest in the maintenance of slavery, and some of these states refused to fight against the North in the Civil War.

All parts of the South, however, share certain characteristic traits. The predominant way of life was agricultural and rural, and few large towns developed over this enormous area. The urban centers of the South are all centers of commerce, where the agricultural products could be sold and shipped abroad: **New Orleans** in Louisiana, on the mouth of

[38] *Jamestown*: The first permanent English colonial settlement in North America, established in 1607. Jamestown became the core of the colony of Virginia, which first developed the plantation-style Southern agriculture relying on slavery. The settlement ultimately did not survive, but Virginia became one of the largest and most influential colonies, later member states of the US.

the Mississippi, **Memphis** further up the river in western Tennessee, or **Atlanta** in **Georgia** are typical examples. The lack of big cities did not attract many foreign immigrants, and therefore the white population remained native-born and mostly British in origin, except for the old French settlers in Louisiana and some Spanish in Florida. After the Civil War, economic depression kept immigrants out of the region, so the South changed little in population or lifestyle while the rest of the US underwent a thorough transformation.

All these factors created the most conservative region of the United States. Most Southerners distrusted and disliked other Americans, and whites held a grudge against "the Yankees" (the word means non-Southerner Americans in the South), who defeated and humiliated them in the Civil War. Most of them felt nostalgic about the "Old South" before 1860, when the region was rich and successful; this nostalgic image was popularized by the hugely successful novel of Margaret Mitchell, *Gone with the Wind* (1936), turned into a spectacular movie in 1939. Most whites were reluctant to admit that slavery was wrong, claiming that owners treated their slaves with parental care. Although black slaves were freed nationwide in 1865 by constitutional amendment, strict racial **segregation**[39] between whites and blacks remained the law in Southern states until the 1960s, and ethnic tensions are still present in many areas. The South is the most religious region of the US, where the majority belong to conservative Protestant denominations, especially the Southern Baptists: the region is often nicknamed the "**Bible Belt**" because of its high proportion of churchgoers. **Martin Luther King**, the famous leader of the black **civil rights movement** in the 1950s and 60s, was also a Baptist minister (for more details about King and the civil rights movement, see ch. 6.6). The majority of the white population of the South has recently become strong supporters of the more conservative Republican Party, and a Southern Republican, George W. Bush from Texas, won the presidency twice between 2001 and 2009.

Since World War II, the South has changed considerably: many businesses began to move to the South, attracted by low labor costs and low taxes, while people were looking for a more pleasant climate in the "Sun Belt", especially in Texas, Florida, and Georgia. As a result, some areas of the South have undergone industrialization and urbanization:

[39] *segregation*: The physical separation of social groups based on race, ethnicity or other external criteria. In most Southern states after the Civil War, segregation was legal, established by state legislatures and enforced by the police and the courts. Blacks could not eat and drink in the same restaurants and bars, could not travel in the same railroad cars, could not stay in the same hotels, could not go the same schools as whites. Segregation was just one of the many ways in which American blacks were discriminated against, but it was perhaps the most visible and most irrational.

Dallas and **Houston** in Texas have become centers of the oil and aerospace industry, while **Miami** in southern Florida grew into a major American city due to its attractions as a holiday resort. The population in these big urban centers has become more mixed. Nevertheless, other areas preserved many of the traditional Southern characters.

Statue of Elvis Presley in Memphis, Tennessee (photo by Károly Pintér)

The South is very proud of its rich cultural heritage. During the 20th century, several Southern authors achieved international fame, e.g. **William Faulkner**,[40] most of whose novels take place in an imaginary Southern county, or **Tennessee Williams**,[41] whose most successful plays portray the decline of Southern families. Most of the popular American musical genres originate from the region: the **blues** was the music of black slaves in the Mississippi delta, **gospel** music developed in black church congregations, while white **country music** has its roots in English and Scottish folk music played in the Appalachian hills. **Jazz** developed out of the black heritage in New Orleans in the early 20th century, while **rock & roll** used elements of both blues and country in the 1950s. Dozens of world-famous American musicians came from the South, including jazz trumpeter and singer **Louis Armstrong**,[42] born in New Orleans, the

[40] *William Faulkner* (1897–1962): American novelist and short story writer, who lived most of his life in the state of Mississippi, where the majority of his fiction also takes place. He explored the social history and the complicated race relations of the South in most of his novels and stories. Perhaps his most famous novel is *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), celebrated as a milestone of American experimental fiction. He received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1949.

[41] *Tennessee Williams* (1911–1983): American playwright, who became world famous after World War II with such dramas as *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955). He grew up in the state of Mississippi and in St. Louis and drew on his personal experiences to portray his characters.

[42] *Louis Armstrong* (1901–1971): American jazz musician, who achieved worldwide fame and success with his unique trumpet playing skills as well as his distinctive gravelly voice. He grew up in New Orleans in extreme poverty but became successful in Chicago and New York between the wars. After 1945, he travelled worldwide and performed to huge audiences, even visiting in Hungary in 1965. He was the first African American to be accepted by white society at a time when most blacks still suffered from segregation and discrimination.

"King of rock & roll", **Elvis Presley**,[43] who grew up in Memphis, Tennessee, or country singer **Johnny Cash**,[44] born in Arkansas.

3.5. Middle West or Midwest

The Middle West, or Midwest, as most people call it, is considered the American heartland: it is right in the middle of the North American continent, occupying most of the Interior Plains. It has no access to any ocean, and most of its territory consists of either completely flat land or gently rolling prairies. It is roughly triangular in shape, with the narrowest part in the east, between the **Great Lakes** and the **Ohio River** that separates the Midwest from the South. West of the Mississippi River it extends as far as the Canadian border in the north, and it ends in the west where the ranges of the **Rocky Mountains** rise out of the Plains (see map below).[45] The southern boundary is the least clearly defined, because west of the Mississippi no clear geographic border separates the Midwest from the South. The most widely accepted opinion draws the line at the southern border of Missouri and Kansas, but based on geographic features, Oklahoma and West Texas would also belong here (although they are more commonly associated with the Southwest). Altogether, there are 12 Midwestern states: **Ohio**, Indiana, **Illinois**, Michigan and Wisconsin east of the Mississippi, and Minnesota, Iowa, **Missouri**, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska and Kansas west of the river.

[43] *Elvis Presley* (1935–1977): American singer, who became an iconic figure of the "rock and roll revolution" of the 1950s and an idol of young people both in the US and worldwide. He was born in the state of Mississippi in a poor family, later grew up in Memphis, Tennessee, and burst into the national entertainment scene in 1956 with several successful songs like "Heartbreak Hotel", "Hound Dog", "Love Me Tender", and "Jailhouse Rock". In his later career, he also performed country, gospel, and blues songs as well as general pop music. He is the bestselling solo music artist of all time with over 500 million records sold. He died of a heart attack at an early age, but the decline of his health was mostly due to his addiction to prescription drugs. His death shocked America and the whole world.
[44] *Johnny Cash* (1932–2003): American singer and musician, who became perhaps the most famous performer of the country music genre. Born in rural Arkansas in a poor cotton farmer family, his career started in the late 1950s in Memphis, Tennessee, with such early successes as "I Walk the Line", "Don't Take Your Guns to Town" and "Ring of Fire". Despite his recurring struggles with alcoholism and drug addiction, he remained a successful artist until his last years.
[45] Source of map: https://www.touropia.com/midwest-states-map/

Within the region, the most important dividing line is the **Mississippi River**: the land west of it was settled later, in the second half of the 19th century, than the Great Lakes area and the valley of the Ohio River. Also, much of the eastern Midwest was transformed by industrialization in the late 19th and early 20th centuries: heavy industry began a spectacular development in the Great Lakes area, giving rise to several big cities like **Cleveland** in Ohio or **Detroit** in Michigan state, which used to be the center of American car manufacturing. Further west, **Chicago** on the shore of **Lake Michigan** emerged as the largest city of the whole region, because it was in the center of western railway lines and developed a huge meatpacking and food-processing industry. In the early 20th century, Chicago competed with New York in the building of skyscrapers, which created a characteristic skyline along the shore of the lake. In the 1920s, Chicago also became infamous as a lawless city because organized crime gangs fought for the valuable illegal alcohol market. Today the Chicago metropolitan area is the third largest in the whole nation, with close to 9 million people in 2021. The westernmost industrial center is the **Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul** in Minnesota, located on both sides of the Mississippi River, which rises in the state.

View of downtown Chicago (photo by Károly Pintér)

In general, the states west of the Mississippi remained rural and agricultural, with no big cities except for **St. Louis** and **Kansas City**, both on the **Missouri River**, which grew large as centers of commerce and the starting point of immigrants planning to move westward. A spectacular structure erected in St. Louis, the **Gateway Arch**,[46] which was meant to symbolize the city's historic role as "the Gateway to the West".

The common joke is that the Midwest has nothing but **"cows and corn"**, referring the two most common products of the local farms. Three-fourth of US corn is grown in the so-called **Corn Belt**, which stretches in an east-west direction from Indiana to eastern Nebraska. Further north, especially in Minnesota and Wisconsin, where the climate is too cold for corn, cattle raising and **dairy farming** is the most common occupation. The climate of the region is getting drier as one travels westward, therefore in the western

[46] *Gateway Arch*: A 190-m tall monument, designed by Finnish-American architect Eero Saarinen and opened to the public in 1967, which commemorates the westward expansion of the United States, in which St. Louis, lying at the confluence of the Mississippi and the Missouri rivers, played a key role for a long time. The idea for a monument arose in the 1930s, during the Great Depression, Saarinen's design was approved in 1947, but it took another 20 years to complete the largest stainless-steel arch in the world. Visitors are taken to the observation desk at the top of the arch by special trams.

edge of the region (Kansas and the Dakotas), the primary crop is wheat and irrigation is necessary.

In the American popular imagination, the Midwest is seen as the most characteristically American region, where the traditional values of the nation have been preserved. Farmers worked hard, had an independent livelihood, and treated all other people as equals. These are the principles on which the United States was founded, and before the 20th century, farm and small-town life was considered both morally superior to the corrupting influence of big cities. Although today the great majority of the US lives in big cities or their suburbs, the slow, peaceful, and healthy rural lifestyle still has a very positive image for many Americans. In the large industrial cities, the extraordinary mixture of various immigrant ethnic groups created a typically American blend of cultures and traditions.

The Gateway Arch in St. Louis on the bank of the Mississippi River (photo by Károly Pintér)

Perhaps the most famous author who immortalized life in a small Midwestern town was **Mark Twain**,[47] who grew up in the mid-19th century in a small town on the Mississippi River. Famous Midwesterners include **Abraham Lincoln**,[48] who was an Illinois Congressman before elected President in 1860, or 20th century president **Ronald Reagan**[49] (1981–89), who

[47] *Mark Twain* (1835–1910): He is considered the greatest comic writer in American literature. Born Samuel Langhorne Clemens, he was raised in Hannibal, Missouri, a small town on the bank of the Mississippi, which was the venue of his two classic novels, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) and the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). He wrote a lot of humorous short stories, sketches, and travelogues as well.

[48] *Abraham Lincoln* (1809–1865): He is considered the greatest American president (1861–1865) next to George Washington. Born in log cabin in Kentucky, he was raised in Indiana on a frontier farm. As a young man, he moved further west to Illinois, where he mostly educated himself, ultimately becoming a lawyer. In 1856, he joined the newly founded, anti-slavery Republican Party and became the party's presidential candidate in 1860. After his victory, 11 Southern states seceded from the United States to form the Confederate States of America. Lincoln declared this step a rebellion, believing that the Constitution did not allow the secession of any state, and led the Union to victory during the Civil War. He was assassinated in April 1865, a few days after Southern surrender, in Ford Theatre in Washington.

[49] *Ronald Reagan* (1911–2004): US president between 1981 and 1989. Born into a poor family in rural Illinois, he first became a sports commentator, then moved to Hollywood in the late 1930s and became a successful actor. In the 1950s, as the president of the Screen Actors Guild, he was a devout anti-Communist. In 1966, he was elected governor of California as a Republican, and in 1980 he won the presidential election. During his two terms, he was a very popular president, whose low taxes generated economic growth, while he successfully negotiated nuclear disarmament with the Soviet Union.

was born and raised in Illinois. The industrial part of the Midwest has such heroes as **Thomas A. Edison**[50] from Ohio, inventor of the light bulb and the phonograph, or **Henry Ford**,[51] who revolutionized car manufacturing in Detroit.

3.6. The West

The West occupies an enormous area, almost half of the Continental United States, from the Rocky Mountains to the **Pacific Coast**. It is the youngest cultural region of the country, since it was the "last frontier", the most recent region on the continent to be settled by white European immigrants. In the mid-19th century, the western half of the present US was still mostly wilderness inhabited by **Native American tribes**,[52] and even at the dawn of the 20th century population was scattered and small beyond the Pacific coastal area. With such a short history behind it, the unity of the West as a region is seriously debated by many scholars, since there are very few geographical or cultural features that seem to unite the crowded cities of California with the empty deserts of Nevada or the high mountains of Colorado. Many prefer to subdivide the area into smaller regions on the basis of topography, economic activities or the patterns of urbanization.

Yet there are certain unifying features to the region as a whole: while it is extremely rich in impressive landscape and beautiful natural sights, it has little water and fertile land, covered mostly by tall mountain ranges and vast desert plains. As a result, it can support few people, and apart from California, this region has the lowest population density in the US. This relatively small population is concentrated in a handful of metropolitan areas, primarily along the Pacific Coast and some other places with good water supply. The rest

[50] *Thomas Alva Edison* (1847–1931): inventor and businessman, who achieved worldwide fame and success despite having no higher education in natural sciences. Born in Ohio and raised in Michigan, he mostly educated himself in chemistry and electricity while working as a telegraph operator. In his New Jersey laboratory, he created such pioneering inventions as the phonograph in 1878 and the electric light bulb in 1880. Altogether, over 1000 US patents were registered under his name.

[51] *Henry Ford* (1863–1947): founder of Ford Motor Company, one of the richest and most influential industrial magnates in early 20th-century United States. Born in Michigan into a farming family, he became interested in technology and built his first automobile in the 1890s. His car company was founded in 1903 in Dearborn, Michigan, and launched the cheap and sturdy Model T in 1908, which became the most popular American model, selling over 15 million cars. His company also pioneered the moving assembly line, which made car manufacturing both faster and cheaper. In his later life, Ford became an iconic figure of American industry, but also a controversial figure due to his opposition to labor unions and strong Antisemitism.

[52] With the significant exception of New Mexico, where Spanish settlers moved in as early as the 17th century: Santa Fé, founded in 1610, is the oldest city in the US west of the Mississippi.

of the country is almost empty of humans, with a few scattered small towns and farms. This is even true to California, which is sharply divided between an extremely crowded coastal area and a thinly populated backland east of the coastal mountains. The West has preserved much of the landscape and the atmosphere of the "**Wild Western**" tales and movies that became so strongly associated with the image of the US abroad.

The Western states are commonly subdivided into smaller groups based on their geographic features: the **Mountain West** includes the states of Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, and Colorado, crossed by the highest ranges of the Rocky Mountains (although the eastern part of the last three states is relatively flat, geographically belonging to the Great Plains). The **Desert West** includes the largest part of the region, most of the land between the Rockies and the coastal range, which receive very little rain or snow, therefore human life is possible only near rivers or lakes in the states of Nevada, Utah, Arizona and New Mexico. The **Pacific Northwest** consists of Washington and Oregon, or rather, the rainy and mild coastal areas of these two states under the influence of the ocean (their eastern part, beyond the Cascade Range, is semiarid). Finally, the coastal area of **California** differs so significantly from all other parts that it should be considered a separate region on its own (see map below).[53]

View of the Painted Desert in northern Arizona (photo by Károly Pintér)

[53] Source of map: https://www.elephango.com/index.cfm/pg/k12learning/lcid/10680/Regions_of_the_U.S._-_West

But other subregional divisions are also possible: the area along the Mexican border – Southern California, Arizona, New Mexico, and western Texas – are often referred to as the **Southwest**, a region distinguished not so much by geography but by a heavy influence of **Hispanic culture** deriving from the large and continuing flow of Mexican and other Latin American immigrants across the border. The state of **Utah** differs from the rest of the region by the presence of the Mormon church, the first settlers of the Great Salt Lake area in 1847, whose hard work and strong community spirit turned the desert into prosperous farmland and a thriving business area (for more details about the Mormons, see ch. 14.6).

Apart from the river valleys, the West has little fertile agricultural land: the predominant economic activities before the 20th century were cattle raising in large open ranges and mining various ores, especially precious metals. Many of the earliest white settlers were attracted to areas of the West by tales of fabulous riches of gold and silver in the distant mountains of northern California, Colorado, or Montana. Other settlements sprang up along railroad lines, functioning as local centers of trade and communication. After World War II, a few cities began to attract businesses and people from other regions and quickly developed into large population centers, such as **Denver** in Colorado, **Salt Lake City** in Utah, **Las Vegas** in Nevada (the capital of gambling in the US), **Phoenix** in Arizona or **Seattle** in Washington. Today, the majority of the population of these states is concentrated in and around these cities, and they continue to experience quick growth as part of the general migration into the "Sun Belt".

View of Yosemite National Park in the Sierra Nevada, Northern California (photo by Károly Pintér)

California was the first state to be founded in the West in 1850, shortly after the famous **gold rush** in 1849 attracted people from the east to the San Francisco area in the northern part. Later settlers began to cultivate the fertile Central Valley between the coastal range and the Sierra Nevada, turning California into the primary producer of various fruits and vegetables, orange, grape, and wine in the US. The attractions of Southern California were discovered in the late 19th century, and **Hollywood**[54] soon achieved worldwide fame as the center of the American motion-picture and entertainment industry. Millions of people from other parts of the US and all over the world have been attracted by the permanent sunshine, the sandy beaches, and the career opportunities to the Los Angeles area, turning it into the second largest metropolitan area in the country, with more than 12 million people. Since the 1960s, California has been the **state with the largest population in the US**, with over 40 million people in 2020. This population is also among the most diverse in the US: whites have recently been

[54] *Hollywood*: Originally, a small settlement in Southern California, northwest of central Los Angeles, and it was incorporated into the city of LA in 1910. Soon after, movie studios began to move to the Los Angeles area due to its pleasant climate, good natural light and varied scenery. By the 1920s, Hollywood became the center and the symbol of the American motion picture industry. The Hollywood Walk of Fame was opened in 1958 to commemorate artists, directors, and other significant figures of the entertainment industry. By the 1980s, most of the major studios have moved out of the historic Hollywood, and the area went into a serious decline, but in the early 21st century it has been largely gentrified to welcome the endless waves of tourists.

overtaken by Latinos, who make up 40% of the state, but it also has the largest community of various Asian immigrants in the US. Besides the motion-picture industry, the other major attraction of the state since the 1950s has been first the aerospace industry and later information technology, especially in "**Silicon Valley**", the area immediately south of San Francisco in northern California, where the headquarters of many world-famous companies are located (Lockheed, Apple, Intel, Hewlett-Packard, Tesla, etc.) The emergence of this area as the center of American high-tech industries has been inspired by the closeness of **Stanford University**.

The Golden Gate Bridge at the entrance of San Francisco Bay, California (photo by Károly Pintér)

Despite its relative youth, the West has also contributed famous cultural figures to America: **Jack London**, born and raised in San Francisco, was the first writer to chronicle the Alaska gold rush of 1897 based on personal experiences in *The Call of the Wild* (1903) and other stories. Another famous American writer from central California is **John Steinbeck**, who portrayed the life of the poor and downtrodden with strong empathy in such novels as *Of Mice and Men* (1937) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). He won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1962. The controversial American president **Richard Nixon** (1968–1974) was also born and raised in California, and he was also a representative of California in the US Congress in the early stage of his political career.

Contemporary cultural heroes coming from the West include such famous pioneers of computer technology as **Bill Gates**, co-founder of Microsoft, who was born and raised in Seattle, Washington, or **Steve Jobs**, co-founder of Apple, who was born in San Francisco and spent most of his life in California. The majority of Hollywood movie stars live in or near Los Angeles, but most of them do not hail from the West, even though one of them, the Austrian immigrant body builder and action movie star **Arnold Schwarzenegger** even became the governor of California, his "adopted home state", between 2003 and 2011.

3.7. Test Yourself – Maps and games

Test yourself whether you can locate the states and cities of the various regions of the USA on an outline map.

Northeastern (New England + Mid-Atlantic) states:
https://online.seterra.com/en/vgp/3141

Southern states: https://online.seterra.com/en/vgp/3140

Midwestern states: https://online.seterra.com/en/vgp/3138

Western states: https://online.seterra.com/en/vgp/3139

Major cities: https://online.seterra.com/en/vgp/3095

3.8. Key terms and concepts

New England:
Adams, John
American Revolution
Anglican
Boston
Boston Tea Party
Calvinist
Emerson, Ralph Waldo
Franklin, Benjamin
Harvard University
Hawthorne, Nathaniel
Kennedy, John F.

Massachusetts
Northeast
Pilgrims
Puritans
Thanksgiving
Thoreau, Henry David
Yale University
Yankee

Mid-Atlantic:
Allen, Woody
Broadway
Central Park
Columbia University
Constitutional Convention
Declaration of Independence
East Coast
Hudson River
Manhattan
metropolitan area
New York City
New York State
Northeast
Penn, William
Pennsylvania
Philadelphia
Roosevelt, Franklin D.
Roosevelt, Theodore
urbanization
Wall Street
Washington D.C.

South (region):
Armstrong, Louis
Atlanta
Bible Belt
blues
Cash, Johnny
civil rights movement
Civil War
cotton
country music
Dallas
Deep South
Faulkner, William
Florida
Georgia
gospel
Gulf of Mexico
Houston
Jamestown
jazz
Jefferson, Thomas
King, Martin Luther
Louisiana
Madison, James
Memphis
Miami
New Orleans
Ohio River
plantation
Presley, Elvis
rock and roll
segregation
slavery
South Carolina
Texas
Upland South
Virginia
Washington, George
Williams, Tennessee

Middle West / Midwest:
Chicago
Cleveland
Corn Belt
“cows and corn”
dairy farming
Detroit
Edison, Thomas A.
Ford, Henry
Great Lakes
Illinois
Kansas City
Lake Michigan
Lincoln, Abraham
Mark Twain
Minneapolis/St. Paul
Mississippi River
Missouri
Ohio River
Ohio State
Reagan, Ronald
Rocky Mountains
St. Louis

West (region):
California
Denver
Desert West
Gates, Bill
gold rush
Hispanic culture
Hollywood
Jobs, Steve
Las Vegas
London, Jack
Mountain West
Native American tribes
Pacific Coast
Pacific Northwest
Phoenix
Salt Lake City
Schwarzenegger, Arnold
Seattle
Silicon Valley
Southwest
Stanford University
Steinbeck, John
Utah
Wild West(ern)

4. A Brief History of immigration to the United States

4.1. Native Americans

The earliest inhabitants of North America are the Native American ethnic groups, whose ancestors arrived from Siberia across the Bering Strait (which was not covered by water at the time due to lower sea levels) at least 12,000 years ago, and gradually spread across the whole continent down to the tip of South America. In North America, the most sophisticated cultures emerged in Central Mexico (the Aztec Empire) and in the Yucatán peninsula (the Maya): no high culture comparable to them developed in the territory of the present US. North American Indians lived in small communities called **tribes** which consisted of clans (group of related families). Their lifestyle strongly depended on their natural surroundings.

Most tribes living in the woodlands east of the Mississippi River combined hunting and fishing (practiced by men) with the gathering of nuts and berries as well as hoe agriculture[55] growing **corn**, beans, and squash (practiced by women). They typically had temporary villages and their population remained relatively small, scattered over large territories.

Native American tribes living on the Great Plains developed a nomadic lifestyle. They followed and hunted the **buffalo** herds that roamed the **prairie**,[56] and utilized almost all parts of the animals, eating their meat, using their hides for clothes and tepees (Indian tents) and their bones for tools. After the Spanish colonizers brought horses to North America in the 16th century (earlier, the largest domesticated animals in the continent had been dogs and llamas), Plains Indians living west of the Mississippi quickly adopted them, which made their nomadic lifestyle significantly easier.

The Native American tribes living in the Southwest lived in pueblos, or permanent villages consisting of stone buildings, and practiced subsistence agriculture.[57] Their architectural

[55] *hoe agriculture*: A relatively primitive form of agriculture practiced by people who are still not familiar with the plow and do not use harness animals (horses, oxen, etc.) to break the soil and plant seeds, only hand tools like hoes to clean the weeds.
[56] *prairie*: a large open, flat, treeless grassland area, especially in the Great Plains region of the Central United States. It is the American synonym of the Russian *steppe*.
[57] *subsistence agriculture*: A typically primitive form of agriculture when the crops or livestock produced by the farmers are used to support them and their families, with little or no surplus left for sale. This low level of output

skills were the most advanced in North America, but their social and cultural development was limited by the dry climate and the poor soil. After 1500 nomadic tribes moved into the region from the north: they mostly kept herds of sheep and goats which could survive on the poorer vegetation.

Ruins of 12th-century Native American buildings in Mesa Verde National Park, southern Colorado (photo by Károly Pintér)

Despite the variety of their lifestyle, the North American Indians shared several key social and cultural traits. They knew how to make clay pots and dishes, and made their tools out of stone, wood, and animal bones. Their typical weapons were spears, knives, bows and arrows. After they encountered European colonists, they adopted many of their domesticated animals and their more advanced metal tools and weapons. But Native Americans in North America never learned metalwork or other advanced technologies, never practiced intensive agriculture, they never developed any writing system on their own, and did not build any cities or large permanent settlements. As a result, they were

may be due to poor soil or difficult climate, lack of sophisticated farming skills and advanced technologies, or simply because farmers do not want to sell their products on the market, content to provide food for themselves.

seen by European colonists as culturally inferior people who occupy far more territory than they need or make use of. This way, whites felt justified to occupy "unused" land and chase away Native Americans from their traditional habitat.

The history of European settlement in North America is also the history of the dispossession and decline of Native American ethnic groups. Some of them were almost wiped out by diseases brought in by Europeans (especially smallpox), others were killed in wars against colonists, or were forced to move into areas which were less suitable for their way of life (e.g. the federal government removed several Indian tribes from the South to present-day Oklahoma in the 1830s; the long and difficult journey was remembered by Native Americans as the "Trail of Tears"[58]). In the late 19th century, all remaining Native Americans were ordered by the federal government to move into **reservations**, areas reserved for them and overseen by federal authorities. Most of these reservations were located in areas with the least favorable conditions (mountains and deserts), where the inhabitants were dependent on government supplies. As a result, the number of Native American population in the US became almost insignificant by the early 21th century: the most recent census data from 2020 show that less than 4 million people identified themselves as Native American (including the original inhabitants of Alaska, who are called Inuits), and they make up merely about 1% of all American citizens.

A Native American woman selling souvenirs at Monument Valley, which is part of the Navajo Reservation in northern Arizona (photo by Károly Pintér)

[58] *Trail of Tears*: After the Indian Removal Act was passed in 1830, the so-called Five Civilized Tribes living in the territory of present-day Georgia, Alabama and Mississippi were forcibly relocated to the western side of the Mississippi River, to present-day Oklahoma, between 1831 and 1838 by the federal government, in order to clear their ancestral lands for white settlement. Thousands of Native Americans died during the difficult journey from starvation and diseases.

4.2. Immigration in colonial times

In the two centuries after the discovery of the American continent by Europeans in 1492, three nations took the largest part in the colonization of North America: Spain, France, and England.

Spanish *conquistadors* were the first to establish a permanent settlement in **Florida**, which remained a Spanish colony until the early 19th century, and they also explored the Southwest of the US, creating settlements in present-day **New Mexico**. But besides these two areas of the present US, Spain concentrated its efforts on Mexico in North America.

Memorial for the French founders of St. Louis (photo by Károly Pintér)

The **St. Lawrence River** was discovered **French** explorers, and subsequent French colonization focused on the river valley and the **Great Lakes area** (called Canada), and, from the 18th century, to the lower Mississippi valley (called Louisiana). Since both the Spanish and the French were rivals of the English in the colonization of North America, the English colonies received very few immigrants from these two countries: the only significant group of French-speaking Americans live in the state of **Louisiana**.

The English colonies were established along the east coast of the North American continent between Canada and Florida during the 17th and 18th centuries. The two earliest settlements were **Virginia** in the south (where **Jamestown was founded in 1607**) and **New England** in the north (where **Plymouth was founded in 1620**), and other areas were gradually occupied. Although the majority of the settlers came from England, and later from Britain (including a significant proportion of Scottish and Protestant Irish immigrants), the population of the colonies was never purely English-speaking or purely white. A significant number of **Dutch** people lived in and around New York City and in the Hudson River valley, while **Protestant Germans** made up one-third of the

population of **Pennsylvania**, while all the southern colonies imported a large number of **black slaves** from West Africa and the Caribbean. New England, the northernmost group of colonies, remained the most homogeneous in ethnic character, populated mostly by English **Puritans** (about the colonial heritage, see also ch. 2.2).

At the time of the first American **census**[59] in 1790, about 3.9 million people lived in the newly independent United States. About 700,000 or 18% were black slaves, and another 50,000 were free blacks, while 3.15 million people were whites. The census did not ask about people's ethnic origins or background, but historians estimated (based on a careful examination of surnames) that a little more than half of the white population had English origins, another third had Scottish, Welsh or Irish background, so altogether about 85% of the white settlers could ultimately trace back their origins to the British Isles. The largest non-British ethnic groups were the Germans with about 9%, and the Dutch with 2%. As the data show, American society during and after the War of Independence was dominated by English-speaking people who were almost exclusively Protestant. The oldest European immigrants remained an elite group within US society, and in the early 20th century they were often referred to as **WASPs**, or **White Anglo-Saxon Protestants**.

4.3. Immigration in the first half of the 19th century

In the early years of the 19th century, European immigration to the United States was insignificant. Britain was hostile to its newly independent colony, whereas the Napoleonic Wars in Europe (1798–1815) and the subsequent British blockade on Continental ports made immigration very difficult. The importation of black slaves was also banned by Congress in 1808, and even though illegal smuggling continued, large numbers of blacks no longer arrived from West Africa or the Caribbean.

Immigration began to increase after 1830, but the first huge wave of Europeans reached the independent US in the 1840s and 1850s. The main reason was the Great Famine[60] in

[59] *census*: an official and nationwide population count to determine the number of a country's residents. Modern censuses also collect a large amount of statistical information about the population (age, race and ethnicity, occupation, social circumstances, etc.). In the US, the Constitution prescribed a census every 10 years to determine how many representatives should belong to each state, therefore censuses have been conducted since 1790.
[60] *Great Famine or Potato Famine* (1845–49): One of the most devastating mass starvations in European and world history occurred in Ireland in the 1840s. The very poor and significantly overpopulated Irish peasant masses

Ireland (1845–49), which caused mass starvation and forced millions of people to emigrate from the country. Between 1840 and 1860, about 1.7 million **Irish** came to the US. The second largest source was Germany, which at this time was divided into many small states, and a lot of people felt disappointed after the failure of the 1848 revolutions which tried to reunite the country. Between 1840 and 1860, about 1.4 million **Germans** arrived in the US. Significant numbers came also from Great Britain. As a result of the big wave, the proportion of foreign-born people within US population grew from an estimated 5% in 1840 to more than 13% in 1860 (and it would remain around that figure until 1920). The immigrants who arrived between 1840 and 1860 are sometimes called "**Old Immigrants**", since they are seen as the earliest large group of immigrants in the history of the independent US (those whose ancestors had come to the British colonies before 1775 considered themselves "native-born Americans" by the mid-19th century).

Most Irish immigrants were poor peasants, who could not afford to buy land on their own, therefore they settled in large cities along the East Coast, especially in New York, Boston, and Philadelphia. Contrary to earlier Irish immigrants, the Irish arriving after 1840 were predominantly **Catholic**, forming the first large non-Protestant ethnic group in the US. As a result of their poverty and their Catholicism, they encountered a lot of hostility and negative prejudices. They were uneducated and unskilled, often illiterate, therefore they could only get heavy manual labor. The men worked in factories and on construction projects; the women also became factory workers (especially in textile and clothing) or household servants. In the late 19th century, many Irishmen joined the ranks of the police. The Protestant majority were highly suspicious of Irish Catholics, and anti-Catholic propaganda was widespread in this period. Conflicts between Irish Catholics and Protestants occasionally burst out in open riots.

The German immigrants were more varied in their social and religious background, and they were more attracted to the western frontier. Many of them settled in the Midwest, especially in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Missouri, and Ohio, but also in Texas and California, where they bought farms or founded entirely German towns. Many others moved into cities: Milwaukee, St. Louis and Cincinnati became large centers of German Americans. The majority of them was Protestant, mostly Lutheran, but about one-third were Catholic and some of them Jewish. They contributed significantly to American cuisine:

survived mostly on potato, the most widespread crop of the island. A certain fungus (potato blight) attacked the potato plants, which caused the potatoes to rot in the ground before harvest several years in a row. The British government did little to alleviate the catastrophe, increasing the general hatred against them. An estimated one million people died, and another one million emigrated from Ireland to other countries, including the United States.

hamburgers and **hot dogs** were both originally German foods, and many of the popular **beer** breweries were founded by German immigrants.

In the 1850s, a significant number of **Chinese** immigrants began to arrive in California, attracted by the **gold rush**[61] and other job opportunities in the fast-developing state. They worked on farms and in industry, built the transcontinental railroad, opened shops and laundries. Most of the Chinese were concentrated in **San Francisco** and **California**, but they soon moved to large cities on the East Coast too. They were the earliest group of Asian immigrants to the US, but they were soon confronted with hostility, especially during the economic downturn after the Civil War, when whites felt that the Chinese are taking jobs away from them. In 1882, Congress passed a law which banned Chinese immigrants from entering the country: it was the first federal law restricting free immigration to the US.

View of Chinatown in San Francisco, California (photo by Károly Pintér)

[61] *California Gold Rush* (1848–1855): The most famous gold rush in American (and perhaps in world) history. It began in 1848, when gold was found in the valley of the Sacramento River in Northern California. The news spread rapidly and attracted about 300,000 people to the area in a few years, turning San Francisco (the nearest port) into a major city and resulting in the statehood of California in 1850. Most of the adventurers looking for gold were disappointed: they never became rich, and some of them fell victim to robbers and swindlers.

4.4. Immigration in the late 19th and early 20th centuries

The Civil War (1861–65) brought a temporary decline in immigration, as the war-torn country was not too attractive to foreigners, but numbers began to grow again in the 1870s. After 1880, however, the ethnic origins of European immigration started to change: while Germans and Irish continued to come, more and more people arrived from Scandinavia, **Italy, Austria-Hungary, and Russia**. The second wave of immigration reached its peak between 1905 and 1915, when an average of one million immigrants arrived in the country each year. The largest ethnic groups were the **Italians**, the **Poles,** and the **Jews**, but significant numbers of **other Eastern and Southern European groups** (Czechs, Hungarians, Russians, Lithuanians, Greeks, etc.) also entered the country. This was the largest wave of European immigration in the history of the US, and those who came in this period used to be called "**New Immigrants**", to distinguish them from the mid-19th century arrivals.

The New Immigrants had a wide variety of ethnic and religious background. The Italians mostly came from Southern Italy and Sicily, and they were devout Catholics. There were many different Slavic groups, who spoke related languages, but often belonged to different churches: most Poles, Czechs and Slovaks were Catholic, but Russians or Ukrainians were Orthodox. The Greeks also followed the Orthodox faith. The Jews, who came from several different countries (mostly from the Russian Empire, but also from Austria-Hungary and Germany) had their own religion, Judaism. Only the Scandinavians (Swedes, Norwegians, Danes) and some of the Hungarians belonged to Protestant churches.

Despite all this variety, the social background of the immigrants was remarkably similar. They were almost all poor peasants, who left their homeland because they wanted to escape from poverty and find better opportunities in the US. Some of them, like the Poles or the Jews, also fled from political oppression or religious persecution. They were uneducated and unskilled, did not speak English, so they mostly became poorly paid industrial workers, just like the Irish half a century earlier. They were culturally very different from the Protestant America, which received them with alarm, fear, and suspicion. Since most of the free western lands had been occupied by that time, the New Immigrants mostly crowded into the big industrial cities of the East Coast and the Great

Lakes area. New York became the most mixed city, but the poorer parts of Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, Pittsburgh, and several other prosperous industrial cities were filled with ethnic neighborhoods populated by one single ethnic group. These districts were often nicknamed 'Little Italy' or 'Little Warsaw'; here, the immigrants could use their own mother tongue among themselves and had a sense of relative security in their unknown and sometimes hostile new country.

The huge crowds arriving in the country year by year provoked anti-immigrant rhetoric, and the federal government decided to try to control this massive wave. In 1891, Congress created the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), which opened a screening station in 1892 on Ellis Island in New York harbor. **Ellis Island** became the primary port of entry for millions of immigrants in the next 60 years (it was closed in 1954; today it is a museum). Here, all immigrants were identified based on their passports or other official documents, and they also underwent a medical examination. They could be rejected if they were ill or they had no papers to identify themselves. Many turn-of-century immigrants remembered their days spent on Ellis Island as an anxious, fearful time, when they were worried about their future and the possible rejection by the authorities.

The main hall of the Ellis Island screening station, today a museum (photo by Károly Pintér)

The turn-of-century immigrants significantly changed the ethnic and religious makeup of the United States, bringing a huge amount of additional diversity into an already diverse country. **Catholicism** became a major church in the US, and New York City had the largest concentration of Jews in the world. Popular culture has been greatly influenced by the new wave of immigrants: for instance, **pizza** became one of the most popular foods, while the new motion-picture industry in Hollywood came to be dominated by Jewish businessmen and other Eastern European immigrants.

The social changes were reflected by the census of 1920. The total population of the US was over 105 million (grew by nearly 14 million since 1910), 10% of which consisted of blacks. Other races were insignificant in number. The white population amounted to more than 94 million people, but only 62% of them were native-born Americans whose parents were also born in the country. 24% were second-generation immigrants, whose parents or at least one of them were born abroad, and over 14%, or nearly 14 million people, were first-generation immigrants who were born outside the US. Altogether, every 3rd white American was either an immigrant or had at least one immigrant parent in 1920. The great majority of first-generation immigrants, more than 10 million people, lived in cities and towns.

The largest source countries of foreign-born people were Germany (1.7 million), Italy (1.6 million), Russia (1.4 million), Poland (1.1 million) and Ireland (1 million), followed by England, Sweden, Austria, Hungary (400,000 people), and Czechoslovakia. It is important to note, however, that source countries do not always identify nationality: most of the Jews came from Russia and Poland, for example. The immigrants mostly swelled the population of the eastern states: the five largest states in 1920 were New York, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Ohio, and Texas, all but one of them located on the East Coast or in the Great Lakes area, having one or several major industrial cities, which attracted lots of immigrants. The growing urbanization of the United States is well demonstrated by the fact that, for the first time in American history, in 1920 there were slightly more people living in towns (51%) than in rural areas (49%), and a quarter of the population lived in big cities of 100,000 or larger. The five largest cities were **New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Detroit,** and **Cleveland**, all notable for their huge immigrant communities.

4.5. Immigration from the 1920s to the 1960s

During World War I (1914–1918), European immigration nearly came to a halt, since the warring nations did not allow their potential soldiers to leave for America, but after 1920 it began to grow again. There was a growing public pressure on politicians to stop the influx of Southern and Eastern European poor people into American cities, who were willing to work for very low wages and 'imported social problems' into the US. In the new national mood of **isolationism**, Congress passed two Immigration Acts in 1921 and 1924, severely limiting the so far mostly unrestricted flow of European immigrants. The **Immigration Act of 1924** introduced a **quota system** for each country: the number of immigrants who could be admitted from any country were limited at 2% of the number of people from that country who were already living in the US according to the census of 1890. Since the big wave of Southern and Eastern European immigration began after 1890, the Act deliberately cut off further immigration from those countries (e.g. Italians only received 4,000 visas per year), whereas it offered generous quotas to Britain, Ireland, and Germany, which they did not fill. Immigration of Asians was effectively banned. All immigrants had to obtain visas at US embassies abroad before immigration. After 1927, a maximum limit of 150,000 immigrants per year was introduced and the census data of 1920 became the basis of the 2% rule. The law was clearly intended to preserve the existing racial and ethnic proportions in the United States, with an explicit preference for Western Europeans (especially English-speaking people), who were the original inhabitants of the country at the time of independence.

The 1924 Act, which remained in effect for 40 years, was a turning point in the history of immigration to the US: it ended centuries of predominantly pro-immigration policies by the American government and drastically reduced immigration from Europe, with the result that the proportion of whites within American population stopped growing, and slowly began to decline after World War II. The quotas and other limitations did not apply to people coming from the American continent, because western farmers lobbied successfully for cheap immigrant laborers from Mexico. This gave rise to a steadily growing influx of **immigrants from Latin America**.

Besides the restrictive laws, the **Great Depression**[62] which began in 1929 also drastically reduced immigration, since the US suffered the greatest economic collapse in

[62] *Great Depression* (1929–1933): The most devastating economic crisis in the history of the United States, which also triggered a worldwide economic downturn. Triggered by the collapse of the share prices on the New York

its history and lost much of its attraction to foreigners. During the 1930s, the annual number of immigrants often fell below 100,000. During World War II, the US received some political refugees from Europe, but refused to give immigration visas to tens of thousands of German Jews, most of whom perished in the Holocaust.

After the war, although official quotas remained in force, the strict maximum limits were softened by creating a special status for **political refugees** from war-torn Europe, and later from Korea, Hungary (after the 1956 revolution) or Cuba (after Fidel Castro's regime came to power). In the meantime, immigration from Mexico continued to grow, unlimited by federal laws.

4.6. Immigration from 1965 to the present

The national-origins quotas were finally abolished in 1965. The new immigration law replaced the old system with two separate maximum limits for the Eastern and the Western Hemisphere (the latter means the American continent, the former the rest of the world). It also introduced a set of preferences for relatives of people already living in the US, and continued to give priority to political refugees. The most important impact of the new law was that it opened the doors for Asian countries: **Koreans, Filipinos, Vietnamese, Chinese, Asian Indians** and other groups began to immigrate to the US in continually increasing numbers. Most of them settled on the West Coast, especially in Southern California, where they typically operated small shops and other businesses. Although the law introduced limits to Latin American immigration for the first time, it was unable to reduce the flow of **Mexicans** across the border, as well as the immigration of **Cubans**, Haitians, Dominicans, and other groups, typically from the Caribbean and Central America.

By the 1980s, more than 80% of all immigrants arrived either from Asia or Latin America, and this number did not include illegal Mexican immigrants. Mexican immigration reached such a magnitude that Congress passed a new law with the explicit purpose of reducing the influx of poor Mexicans. The law introduced penalties for employers who hired **illegal immigrants** in the hope that this way businesses could be scared away

Stock Exchange in October 1929, the Great Depression caused the failure of thousands of businesses and banks, massive unemployment and poverty, and a prolonged economic stagnation that lasted until the late 1930s and was ended only by the prosperity created by World War II.

from employing illegal Mexicans. At the same time, the law offered amnesty, legal status and ultimately full citizenship for those **illegal aliens** who had been living and working in the country for at least four years. The law, however, turned out to be a failure, because the attraction of higher standards of living in the US proved stronger than fears from deportation. Also, many illegal immigrants hoped for a new wave of amnesty.

Since the 1990s, illegal immigration has become one of the most contentious and seemingly intractable problems of contemporary American politics. As the United States has a more than 3000-km-long land border with Mexico, it is a hopeless task to control this vast area and entirely prevent illegal immigration. About 2000 kms of that border follows the **Rio Grande** in a southeastern direction, separating Texas from Mexico, until the river flows into the Gulf of Mexico. The western 1000 kms of the border crosses vast deserts in southern New Mexico, Arizona, and California until it reaches the Pacific Ocean south of San Diego. Illegal immigrants were mostly attracted to the relatively narrow stretch (about 200 km) between Mexico and California, therefore in the early 1990s the federal government authorized the construction of the first **border fence** along here. In 2006, George W. Bush's government initiated a large-scale barrier construction, and by 2009, more than 500 kms of fencing had been erected along with more than 400 kms of "vehicle barrier". The least guarded part of the border is the desert areas in Arizona and New Mexico, since they were considered too difficult and dangerous for illegal crossings, but this did not deter desperate immigrants and their smugglers, the so-called "coyotes", who often led them across the border with some water and left them to their fate.

Despite all efforts by the US Border Patrol, illegal immigration continued to grow until 2007, and this growth was not stopped by the American law enforcement authorities, but rather the worldwide **economic recession** beginning in 2008: as the American economy entered a long slump and unemployment increased, **undocumented immigrants** also lost many of the low-paid manual jobs on which they made a living. This not only reduced the flow, but even made some of them to return to Mexico: according to estimates, the number of undocumented immigrants fell from over 12 million in 2007 to about 10 million by 2016.

The immigration trends of the late 20th century significantly modified the make-up of contemporary American society: the proportion of **non-Hispanic whites** has been reduced to about 58% of the total US population by 2020 (less than 200 million people), while **Hispanics** have become the second largest group, representing 19% (more than 60 million people) of the population. More than half of the total growth of the American

population between 2010 and 2020 was the growth of Hispanics, which is the result of both intensive immigration and their relatively high birth rate. The proportion of **blacks** remained relatively steady in American society, around 12% (slightly above 40 million), which means that their growth rate is almost identical with the overall growth of US population (about 6-7% over 10 years). The proportion of **Asians** also grew significantly, to 6% (about 20 million) of the total population. Their growth rate (about 35%) is even higher than that of the Hispanics. More than 8% (19 million people) of American society identified themselves as **multiracial**, that is, they consider themselves as white and black, or white and Asian, etc. Native Americans and other races make up little more than 1% of the entire US population.

4.7. Key terms and concepts

Native Americans:
buffalo
corn
prairie
reservation
tribe

Colonial period:
black slaves
Dutch
French Louisiana
German Protestants
Great Lakes area
Jamestown
New England
New Mexico
Pennsylvania
Plymouth
Puritans
Spanish Florida
St. Lawrence River
Virginia

Mid-19th century:
beer
California
Chinese
Germans
gold rush
hamburger
hot dog
Irish Catholics
"Old Immigrants"
San Francisco
WASP = White Anglo-Saxon Protestant

Late 19th and early 20th century:
Catholicism
Chicago
Cleveland
Detroit
Eastern Europeans
Ellis Island
Italians

Jews
New York
Philadelphia
pizza
Poles
Southern Europeans

From the 1920s to the 1960s:
census
Great Depression
Immigration Act of 1924
isolationism
national quotas
political refugees

Since the 1960s:
Asian Indians
Asians
blacks / African Americans
border fence
Chinese
Cubans
economic recession
Filipinos
Hispanics
illegal immigrants / illegal aliens
Koreans
Mexicans
multiracial
non-Hispanic whites
Rio Grande
undocumented immigrants
Vietnamese

5. American society: demography and social classes

5.1. Population data

US population (Census 2020, rounded)	331,449,000 (50 states only) 334,735,000 (including Puerto Rico)
Growth of US population since 2010 (rounded)	22,704,000 (7.4%)
Five largest states by population (Census 2020, rounded)	
1. California	39,538,000
2. Texas	29,146,000
3. Florida	21,538,000
4. New York	20,201,000
5. Pennsylvania	13,003,000
Five smallest states by population (Census 2020, rounded)	
...46. South Dakota	887,000
47. North Dakota	779,000
48. Alaska	733,000
49. Vermont	643,000
50. Wyoming	577,000
Ten largest metropolitan statistical areas (Census 2020, rounded)	
1. New York–Newark–New Jersey (NY–NJ)	20,140,000
2. Los Angeles–Long Beach–Anaheim (CA)	13,201,000
3. Chicago–Naperville–Elgin (IL–IN–WI)	9,619,000
4. Dallas–Fort Worth–Arlington (TX)	7,637,000
5. Houston–The Woodlands– Sugar Land (TX)	7,122,000
6. Washington–Arlington–Alexandria (DC–VA–MD)	6,385,000
7. Philadelphia–Camden–Wilmington (PA–NJ–DE–MD)	6,245,000
8. Miami–Fort Lauderdale–West Palm Beach (FL)	6,138,000
9. Atlanta–Sandy Springs–Alpharetta (GA)	6,090,000
10. Boston–Cambridge–Newton (MA–NH)	4,942,000

5.2. Demographic trends

As it was already mentioned in chapter 1, the United States is the third largest country in the world regarding population. The American Constitution prescribes that a **census** (a count of the nation's population) must be held every ten years (primarily to make sure that states are represented proportionally in the lower house of the federal Congress), therefore the growth of the American population is very well documented ever since 1790. The most recent census was conducted in 2020, and its results are currently (at the time of writing this textbook in mid-2021) are still being processed, but a few fundamental data have already been released by the US Census Bureau (the national institution for all sorts of statistics in the US).

In 2020, there were more than 331 million people in the United States, which is a growth of over 22 million (or 7.4%) compared to 2010. So, the American population is not only very large, but also dynamically growing, having passed the 300 million mark roughly in 2006. But statisticians have also noted that the **growth rate** has slowed down significantly in the new century: in every decade between 1950 and 2000, the number of Americans increased by more than 20 million people (the largest increase occurred between 1990 and 2000, when more than 32 million people were added to the national total), which represented a 10-18% growth in every ten years compared to the overall population numbers at the time. The population boom has had two main sources: high **birth rates** and intensive **immigration** into the United States.

The birth rate jumped very high in the US after World War II, when millions of young soldiers returned home from the war, and they mostly got married and started their own families. This "baby boom", as the contemporary press nicknamed it, increased American population spectacularly, and lots of new suburbs and schools had to be built to provide for the young families. This post-war generation – those born between 1946 and 1964 - received a widespread nickname "**baby boomers**" or simply "**boomers**",[63] and they still represent about 20% of today's American population. This generation played a very significant role in late 20th century American history: as the older members grew up to be

[63] Since the name "boomers" has caught on, it has become a general custom in the US to give nicknames to other generations too, and these terms have spread worldwide. This is the common terminology to identify successive generations of Americans: Baby Boomers (1946–64), Generation X (1965–1980), Millennials (1981–96), Generation Z (1997–2012).

young adults by the late 1960s and early 70s, during the time of the Vietnam War, it was this generation that began to protest against the war and participated in the "countercultural" movements of the era, which changed American culture and politics in several important ways. In 1993, **Bill Clinton** (born in 1946) was sworn in as the first "boomer" president (1993–2001), and since then two others followed him, as both **George W. Bush** (2001–2009) and **Donald Trump** (2017-2021) were also born in 1946. By now, most boomers are in retirement age (in their 60s and 70s), which puts considerable pressure on the Social Security program, which provides federal old-age pensions for all Americans (see details below), as well as on various health care systems nationwide.

From the late 1960s, the very high birth rate (which can also be measured by the so-called **total fertility rate**, or the number of children born to an average woman during her reproductive age) began to decline: while in 1960 an average young American mother had 3.6 children (so the average families at that time consisted of 3 or 4 children), by 1980 this dropped to 1.8, or less than 2 children per family! Ever since then, the fertility rate has been hovering around or below 2.0, which is barely enough to maintain the overall level of the population (since two children ultimately replace their parents, but do not add to the total number of people). This figure is slightly higher than in Europe (where most countries have less children born than the number of people dying each year, with fertility rates well below 2.0) and much higher than in Hungary (where it has been around 1.5 in the 2010s), but it would not be enough to account for the dynamic population increase that is shown by the census data**. Since at least 1980, the US population growth is mostly due to the large-scale immigration of foreign people into the country** (for details, see chapter 4 about the history of immigration into the US).

Due to the falling birth rate, **American society is gradually getting older**, which means there are more elderly people and relatively fewer children. In 2020, 22% of the population, or 73 million people, was aged 18 or below, which is a decline of more than 1 million compared to 2010. On the other hand, the adult population increased by almost 24 million people, which is primarily the outcome of young adults immigrating into the country. If we look at state-level data, we can see that the lowest proportion of children (below 20%) characterizes the three "whitest" New England states, Vermont, Maine, and New Hampshire, which shows that American non-Hispanic whites tend to have the lowest fertility in the country. On the other hand, several sparsely populated Midwestern and Western states have a high proportion of children (25% or more), which probably shows

the increased presence of Hispanic immigrants in the region, who tend to have large families.

5.3. Rich and poor – the American social hierarchy

While the United States is considered one of the richest countries on Earth, and the popular image of America has long been associated with wealth and success worldwide (for details, see ch. 2), in real life, there are huge and growing differences in social status and well-being within American society. Since the United States was founded on the principle of equality (at least the equality of white men), and the Constitution explicitly forbade any titles of aristocracy or nobility, the country never had a hereditary upper class like most European countries with a medieval past. Yet the US also developed its own class structure based on one main marker of social status: **wealth** and **property**. Rich bankers, merchants or industrialists in the North, plantation owners in the South occupied a very similar position to that of an aristocracy in Europe, while there always were lots of poor people in the country: small farmers and agricultural laborers, industrial workers, former slaves with no land on their own, the urban lower class etc. Their numbers were constantly increased by new waves of immigrants, who mostly came from poor agrarian societies with hopes of "making it" in the United States. While few of them became truly rich and successful, many achieved (or their children or grandchildren did) middle-class status, which has usually been the dream of most poor people in the country.

When Americans talk about the "**middle class**", they understand something else under this term than most Western European nations, for example the British. Britain has been notorious for its rigid class structure, in which the middle class distinguished itself sharply from the lower working classes in every possible way: they refrained from **manual labor**, wore elegant clothes, lived in other parts of town, spoke with a different accent, had their own pastimes and hobbies, and so on. Therefore, a British person had to meet several different criteria to be considered "middle class" by his fellow countrymen: they had to have a proper middle-class job (also called "**white-collar job**"[64]), a certain level of education, a "proper" lifestyle and other "middle class"

[64] *white-collar job/worker*: An early 20th century term to describe those kinds of jobs which do not involve heavy manual labor, for instance sitting behind a desk in an office doing paperwork, or working in a profession with a university degree, like a lawyer, doctor, engineer, or teacher. The origin of the term goes back to the 19th century

characteristics. Working-class people were historically considered inferior due to their lack of schooling, their rough manners, their strong regional dialect, and they were treated as subservient by middle-class people in Britain.

In American society, on the other hand, class barriers were never so clearly visible and not nearly so difficult to overcome. Americans came from many places (often from abroad), spoke different kinds of English, had varied educational backgrounds, and most of them believed in the idea of individual success, that anybody can improve their life and achieve success if they work hard and fulfil their potential. As a result, American culture has never considered manual labor lowly or degrading, quite the opposite: humble origins were seen as a positive character trait, since a "**self-made man**"[65] has proven his skills and talent by becoming rich and successful. Presidential candidates of the 19th century often claimed that they were born in a "**log cabin**"[66] to make themselves more attractive to average voters; modern American fashion popularized ordinary working men's clothes worldwide with blue jeans, leather jackets, T-shirts, or baseball caps. While class barriers and their social markers undoubtedly exist in the US too, people can more easily enter the "middle class" by simply making enough money to afford a proper house, a couple of cars, and other typical features of a comfortable way of life. Lack of college education or a **blue-collar** (manual) **job** does not exclude anyone from being considered "middle-class" in the US.

tradition that office clerks and other middle-class workers were expected to wear white shirts at work, whereas manual laborers (e.g. factory workers) wore blue overalls, therefore they were nicknamed „blue-collar workers".

[65] *self-made man*: A person who has started out from poverty or modest circumstances but achieved wealth and success through his own hard work and perseverance. The expression was coined in the 1840s and became a classic term of American individualism as well as a key element of what in the 20th century would be named the "American Dream".

[66] *log cabin*: A simple wooden hut built by pioneers in forested areas of North America. They chopped down trees and built simple rectangular houses by laying the logs horizontally on one another, without using nails or other building materials. The technique of how to build log cabins was probably brought to North America by early Finnish immigrants, but it soon became popular among western settlers. If someone was "born in a log cabin", it meant that this person had very humble origins, the parents were simple farmers or other manual laborers.

A suburban middle-class house in upstate New York (photo by Károly Pintér)

5.4. The American welfare state and its peculiarities

If we look at the development of American society from a historical perspective, there was one major crisis that left its mark on American social attitudes in many ways: the **Great Depression** of the 1930s, which led to widespread poverty and huge social problems all over the country. Until then, Americans had believed in the benefits of unlimited free-market capitalism with a religious fervor, but the Depression demonstrated convincingly that the uncontrolled competition on the free market would not prevent a wholesale collapse of the economy. Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration responded to the national economic and social crisis with a series of relief and reform measures collectively known as the **New Deal**. The New Deal brought many changes to American society, but one of the most important was the creation of the federal **Social Security program** in 1935, which has provided **old-age pensions** to people after retirement and **unemployment benefits** to people who lost their jobs. Combined with several other federal programs to combat poverty and create jobs in depressed regions and industries,

the New Deal was the beginning of a more active involvement of the federal government in improving the living standards of Americans, also known as the "**welfare state**".

The New Deal initiatives were continued in the 1960s by the administration of **Lyndon B. Johnson** (1963–1969), when Congress created the **Medicare and Medicaid programs** to help cover the medical care and the cost of drugs for the elderly and the poor, and offered federal help to finance and improve public schools in relatively poor states. A host of other programs were introduced to alleviate poverty and assist needy groups of society, from food stamps to student loans. All these measures helped to significantly reduce poverty and income gaps between the wealthy and the poor, but federal social expenditures grew exponentially and during the economic difficulties of the 1970s, the government found it increasingly hard to finance all these programs.

In the 1980s, the administration of **Ronald Reagan** (1981–1989) moved in the opposite direction: they blamed economic stagnation on high tax rates and excessive government regulation, and initiated federal **tax cuts** as well as the reduction of spending on **social programs**. These neoliberal policies restarted economic growth, but they also began to widen the income gap once again: the middle class stopped growing in proportion to the overall population, the number of people living in poverty increased, while a very small group of extremely rich people concentrated an incredible amount of wealth in their hands.

As a result of these developments, American society in the early 21st century is among the most unequal among developed Western nations: while an estimated 40 million people (c. 13% of the total population) live under the official poverty line, the three richest Americans in 2018 (Jeff Bezos, Bill Gates, and Warren Buffett) had a combined fortune of over $300 billion, which was more than what the poorer 50% of the entire American population owns. Since then, the fortune of the richest Americans has continued to grow together with the stock prices of the companies they possess.

5.5. Key terms and concepts

baby boomers / boomers
birth rate
blue-collar job / worker
Bush, George W.
census
Clinton, Bill

Great Depression
growth rate
immigration
Johnson, Lyndon B.
log cabin
manual labor
Medicare / Medicaid
manual labor
middle class
New Deal
old-age pension
property
Reagan, Ronald
self-made man
social program
Social Security
tax cut
total fertility rate
Trump, Donald
wealth
welfare state
white-collar job / worker

6. Race and ethnicity in American society

6.1. The concept of race

The society of the United States is famous for its extraordinary variety of races and ethnic groups. First of all, it is important to understand the meaning of these two fundamental terms and the difference between them.

The term '**race'** is traditionally used to denote **groups of people with distinctive physical and anthropological traits**: characteristic skin tone or color, facial features, hair and eye color, and other visually recognizable features. Contrary to popular belief, however, there is no consensus definition about what people belong to the same race because no racial group is actually that different from any other: from a biological point of view, the entire humanity all over the world belongs to one single race, the Homo Sapiens, and any single human is genetically 99.8% identical with any other human, regardless of which 'race' they are considered to belong to.[67]

If one wishes to categorize humanity based on various anthropological traits, the task is truly daunting since there are no clear guidelines for separating people into different groups. The terms 'white' and 'black' seem self-explanatory at first sight, but are Europeans really 'white' and are sub-Saharan Africans really 'black' in complexion? In reality, their skin color is most often various shades of light or dark brown. Where should we group people whose skin tone is somewhere in between 'whites' and 'blacks', for instance dark-skinned inhabitants of India or Native Americans and Australians? And why should blond, blue-eyed, pale-skinned Scandinavians and black-haired, brown-eyed, tanned Southern Italians or Greeks belong to the same 'white race' when their visual appearance is so obviously different?

These and many other problematic issues make the concept of 'race' a controversial and dubious concept in the eyes of many people. If we look at the history of racial classifications, they originated from by European authors in the 17th and 18th century, as

[67] The Hungarian language is able to make a subtle distinction between the two meanings of English 'race' mentioned in this paragraph: in the biological sense, we can translate it as '*faj*' (e.g. "emberi faj" for "human race"), whereas the division of humans into various races due to their anthropological traits is usually translated into Hungarian as '*rassz*' (e.g. "az afrikai/ázsiai/európai rassz").

European colonization began to unfold all over the world, and European travelers encountered various strange people and cultures who obviously looked and behaved very differently and spoke strange foreign languages. To make sense of this bewildering variety, one influential German scholar, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, came up in the late 18th century with a fivefold division, in which he distinguished Caucasians (white Europeans), Mongolians (Central and East Asians), Malayans (Southeast Asians), Ethiopians (black Africans), and Americans (Native Americans). Blumenbach intended his taxonomy as a simple anthropological classification and did not attach any particular cultural or social features to the various races.

From the 17th century on, however, various theories of "scientific race studies" argued that whites are inherently superior to non-white races due to their more sophisticated cultures and political systems, whereas blacks and Native Americans are inferior races since they have been unable to build empires or develop advanced technologies. The concept of 'race' became closely intertwined with the pernicious ideology of **racism**, which claimed that physical, anthropological characteristics determine people's mental abilities, cultural habits, and overall behavior. But racial categories and definitions remained arbitrary: several late 19th and early 20th century authors talked about the "Germanic race" or the "Anglo-Saxon race", for instance, and they considered it generally superior to "Latin race" (meaning people from the Mediterranean countries) or the "Jewish race". Perhaps the most horrifying and murderous example of racist ideology is the Nazi theory about the "Aryan race" (Hitler's synonym for Germanic), which is naturally superior to all others, and its racial "purity" should be preserved, especially from the threat represented by the Jews. This baseless nonsense led to the murder of millions of Jewish people and others during World War II.

In the United States, racial ideologies emerged early primarily to provide moral justification for the slavery of African Americans. White Southerners argued throughout the 18th and early 19th centuries that black slaves are unable to take care of themselves due to their inferior mental abilities, therefore they need "guidance" from white slave owners. After slavery was abolished in 1865, Southern whites (but also many Northern whites) refused to treat black citizens as equals, which gave rise to legalized **racial segregation** in most Southern states. But people who were perceived as members of other races by whites did not fare much better: American Indians were forced into reservations and denied American citizenship until 1924, whereas Chinese immigration into the US was effectively banned from 1882 and other Asians were also excluded from 1924 to the 1960s.

Then why do Americans continue to speak about different 'races' in American society? It is essentially a recognition (often a reluctant one) that the social concept of race is so deeply imbedded in American society and so commonly used by people both to identify themselves and others that its social relevance is impossible to deny. It is crucial, however, to recognize and bear in mind two fundamental restrictions concerning race: that it is not genetic or biological in origin but a **social construction** grouping together people of different ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds; and a racial label does not reveal anything about the mental, social, or cultural characteristics of the members of any racial group.

6.2. The concept of ethnicity

The phrase '**ethnic group**' is derived from the Greek word *ethnos* meaning "people" or "tribe" – the rough equivalent of Hungarian '*nép*'. The adjective 'ethnic' entered the English language in the Middle Ages, probably from the New Testament, and it came to denote a certain **group of people with common cultural traits**: an ethnic group typically inhabits a certain area, speaks a common language, wears distinct clothes, follows characteristic social customs, and they have **a sense of group identity**, that is, they think of themselves as one community. While races are primarily anthropological constructions based on physical traits of humans, ethnic groups are based on cultural and social features, and people classified as one race can usually be subdivided into a large number of different ethnic groups.

One of the most ancient distinguishing features of an ethnic group is a **common language**, and many groups are identified primarily by their language, e.g. such European peoples as Greeks, the Finns or the Poles. But different ethnic groups may speak dialects of the same language, for example Serbs and Croats, or the Swiss and the Austrians. Members of these communities usually see themselves united by other features: their **religious identity** (Eastern Orthodox Serbs v. Catholic Croats) or their **common history** (citizens of Swiss cantons or subjects of the Habsburg Empire). During the course of human history, many ethnic groups disappeared, mixed with others or melted into larger communities (e.g. Cumans into Hungarians), while new ethnic groups were created by migrations or internal conflicts.

Ethnic groups are not identical with nations, because ethnic groups have existed since ancient times, whereas modern nations developed only since the 17th and 18th centuries, and a nation possesses several other distinguishing features (a common government and other institutions, internationally recognized borders, etc.) that ethnic groups as a rule do not have. Nations rarely consist of one single ethnic group as some other ethnic minorities are almost always incorporated within national borders. Yet sometimes the two terms can be near-synonyms: for instance, Hungarians form a nation but they would also be seen by others as an ethnic group (e.g. Hungarian minorities living in neighboring countries or Hungarian immigrants in the United States). On the other hand, there are lots of ethnic groups who never had their own sovereign country, for example the Welsh, the Basques (living in Spain and France) or the Roma (Gypsies). A special example is provided by the Jews who lived in scattered communities over an enormous area, yet they have preserved their sense of identity by their common religion. Countries outside Europe almost always incorporate several different ethnic groups (sometimes a large variety of them), and national borders often cut across the territory of the same ethnic group.

The United States is a very special nation, since it has incorporated a wide variety of different ethnic groups from its inception, and this diversity has continued to grow by new waves of immigration. In colonial times, the dominant ethnic groups were the English and other peoples from the British Isles (Scots, Irish, Welsh) who all spoke English, and that gave the nation its common language as well as the roots of its common culture. Subsequent immigrant groups had to adapt to the dominant cultural traditions while they made an effort to preserve their own ancestral heritage, for instance their native language, religion, customs, food, and other features. While few of the immigrants managed to keep their mother tongue over more than two generations, their other cultural contributions have become part of wider American culture. Consider for instance the variety of religions in the US or such "American" foods as pizza (brought by Italians) or hot dogs and hamburgers (German imports). Most of these ethnic groups had their origins in Europe, but Chinese, Japanese, Mexican and other immigrants have also contributed significantly to the colorful mosaic of American culture (see ch. 4 for more details on the history of immigration to the United States).

If we look at the ethnic situation in contemporary United States, we can still more or less distinguish people of different ethnic background within the white, the Asian or the Native American races (more about this in subchapter 6.4.). **American blacks** are

exceptional, however, since most of them **cannot be subdivided into distinct ethnic groups**. Their ancestors were brought into America from various parts of West Africa or the Caribbean islands, and they were not allowed to preserve their distinctive ethnic traditions by their slave owners during centuries of slavery: they mixed and intermarried to such an extent that they lost their original mother tongues and most of their customs too. In short, they were forcibly "melted" into a common group whose identity was not defined by their origin or their language but their subordinated social status. As a result, most American blacks (except for recent immigrants from Africa) speak English as their mother tongue and are Christian. Their distinctive culture survived mostly in music and their identity is strongly connected to their sense of common history of slavery and segregation (in detail, see subchapter 6.6.).

6.3. Races in the United States

Four races are commonly distinguished within American society:

- **Whites**, the descendants of European immigrants (in official categorization, they are still often called **Caucasians**[68]);
- **Blacks or African Americans**,[69] the descendants of slaves brought to North America from West Africa and the Caribbean;
- **Asians**,[70] the descendants of immigrants from Southeast Asia; and
- **Native Americans**,[71] the descendants of the original inhabitants of North America.

[68] *Caucasians*: A traditional anthropological term for white people, originally invented by German scholar Johann Friedrich Blumenbach in the late 18th century (see subchapter 6.1). 18th-century scientists believed that humanity originated from Asia, specifically from the Caucasus region, therefore the most perfect specimen of white people can still be found there. The term became popular in the 19th century but disappeared from use in the 20th – except in the United States, where it is still common in official descriptions, e.g. in police reports.
[69] Before the 1960s, American blacks were still commonly referred to as Negroes or "colored", but both terms had gone out of fashion by the 1980s, and the "N word" is considered a rude racial slur that must not be used at all – except by blacks themselves who occasionally use it as a humorous term to address one another.
[70] Before the 1960s, Asians were often called "yellow" people, but that is considered a derogatory racial slur today.
[71] Before the 1960s, they were commonly called American Indians, and the Census Bureau still uses that term to identify them. The derogatory racial slur "red" was never actually a correct description of their complexion, which is

The US Census Bureau distinguishes a fifth race which they call "Hawaiian and Pacific islander", but their population is very small, and they mostly live outside the Continental US.

The problematic and biased application of racial categories in American society is best illustrated by the use of the term 'black': **people are commonly considered 'black' in the US if they have any black ancestry** or any recognizable features associated with blacks (e.g. curly black hair or slightly darker brown complexion), even if one of their parents or several of their ancestors were white. This arbitrary notion is best illustrated by former president **Barack Obama** (2009–2017), the son of a white American mother and a Kenyan father who never lived with his son and returned to Kenya when young Barack was only three years old. Obama grew up partly with his mother and partly with his maternal grandparents in Indonesia and Honolulu, had a younger sister who was half-Indonesian, while having practically no direct contact with American black culture and communities. Yet from the moment he entered politics in the late 1990s in Illinois, he has been identified as a 'black' politician, never 'half-black' or 'multiracial', which would be a much more faithful description of his ancestry.

President Barack Obama in 2012[72]

This misleading American terminology is firmly rooted in the history of American slavery and racial segregation: in the American South, whites were careful to separate themselves from any people who had even a partial African American ancestry, therefore everybody was considered 'black' who was not "100% white" – even when black racial features were not visible at all. This deeply prejudiced definition of blackness was called the **'one-drop rule'**, suggesting that one drop of black blood is enough to make somebody black, and it was passed into

only slightly darker than that of whites: it probably originated from the bright facial colors Native Americans wore at wartime.

[72] Source of photo: https://www.whitehouse.gov/administration/president-obama

law in most Southern states after the abolition of slavery to reinforce racial segregation between whites and non-whites.

Another racial category, the term 'Asian', carries its own problems. Originally applied mostly to Chinese and Japanese immigrants, who looked "Oriental" in the eyes of white Americans, it has been extended to any immigrant group from Southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent, many of whom have very different physical appearance from one another (e.g. people from India), so it no longer defines any group with similar visible anthropological characteristics – merely several ethnic groups whose origins go back to the same continent. The term, on the other hand, is not applied to people who come from the Asian part of Russia (Siberia), West Asia, or the Middle East: these people are either classified as 'white' or identified by their ethnic or religious identity as Arabs, Iranians, or Muslims.[73]

These examples illustrate the arguments of many social scientists that racial categories are not objective distinctions between groups but social constructions reflecting cultural prejudices. Nonetheless, in everyday language most Americans continue to identify one another by these labels.

Ordinary Americans would probably miss one more group from the above list: the **Hispanic** or **Latino** people, who came to the US from Spanish-speaking countries of Latin America and the Caribbean. In everyday American society they are considered another race, but social scientists reject the idea, since the physical traits of Hispanics are varied. They can be of any race: there are white (e.g. descendants of Spanish colonizers), black (e.g. descendants of former slaves), Native American (e.g. people from Mexico, Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador and other countries with large native populations) and even Asian Hispanics (e.g. people from the Spanish-speaking Philippines). Therefore, the US Census Bureau defines Hispanics as a "**cultural origin group**", suggesting that their unifying element is not their physical appearance but their common cultural heritage: **the Spanish language and the Catholic religion**.

The Census Bureau last modified its data collection methods in 2000: that is when they created a separate "Asian" racial group, and they began to question people about their Hispanic origin. Since 2000, American citizens have been given the option to select more

[73] The Census Bureau's instructions to the 2010 Census defined 'white' as "a person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa" and specifically instructed census workers to include "Lebanese, Arab, Moroccan, or Caucasian" people among whites.

than one race (in recognition of the growing multiracial population of the country) or to pick an additional "Some Other Race" category if they feel that none of the available options reflect their self-identity. It is very important to note that all surveys are based on **self-identification**: it is not the census workers but the respondents who decide their racial identity.

The chart below shows the most recent available data about races in the United States. At the time of writing (in 2021), the fundamental results of the 2020 Census regarding race have just been published.

Population by Race and Hispanic or Latino Origin for the United States: Census 2020

Group	*Number (rounded)*	*% of Total*
Total population	**331 449 000**	**100.0**
White alone	204 277 000	61.6
Black or African American alone	41 104 000	12.4
American Indian and Alaska Native alone	3 727 000	1.1
Asian alone	19 886 000	6.0
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander alone	690 000	0.2
Some other race	27 916 000	8.4
Two or more races	33 849 000	10.2
Hispanic or Latino (of any race)	62 100 000	18.7

Note: The total of these numbers and percentages adds up to more than 100% because the number of Hispanics overlaps with the figures of various racial groups.

As the chart above shows, close to 34 million people (10% of the total US population) identify themselves as belonging to more than one race, so they are biracial or multiracial in their heritage (maybe Barack Obama would also pick this category). This of course complicates the evaluation of survey results: demographers have provided charts in which they have provided a "minimum-maximum range" for each group – the minimum figure being the number of those who entered only one race, and the maximum the total number of all those people who listed that particular race or group, either alone or in combination with others. In this chart, only the "minimum" numbers are shown for any specific race, as indicated by "alone", and all combinations were added up in the "Two or more races" category.

Another complication is that Hispanic or Latino origin is not considered a racial category by the Census Bureau, therefore Hispanics are listed separately as those of any race who

identified themselves as “of Hispanic or Latino origin”. This subtle distinction is not clearly understood by many Latinos either: the uncertainty concerning their racial identity is reflected by the fact that over 42% of all Hispanics reported “Some other race” in their responses, and another 33% described themselves as “two or more races”, while 20% identified as “white” by race in the 2020 Census.

The following chart undertakes a comparison between the figures of the 2010 and the 2020 Census, which reveals important changes in the overall proportions of American races:

Difference in Population by Race and Hispanic or Latino Origin, for the United States: Census 2010 to Census 2020

	Census 2010		**Census 2020**		**Difference between 2010 and 2020**	
Group	Number (rounded)	% of total	Number	% of total	Numerical difference	% difference
Total population	**308 746 000**	**100**	**331 449 000**	**100**	**22 703 000**	**7.4**
White alone	223 553 000	72.4	204 277 000	61.6	-19 276 000	-8.6
Black or African American alone	38 929 000	12.6	41 104 000	12.4	2 175 000	5.6
American Indian and Alaska Native	2 932 000	0.9	3 727 000	1.1	795 000	27.1
Asian	14 674 000	4.8	19 886 000	6.0	5 212 000	35.5
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	540 000	0.2	690 000	0.2	150 000	27.8
Some other race	19 107 000	6.2	27 916 000	8.4	8 809 000	46.1
Two or more races	9 009 000	2.9	33 849 000	10.2	24 840 000	275.7
Hispanic or Latino (of any race)	50 478 000	16.3	62 080 000	18.7	11 602 000	23.0

This chart reveals, among other things, that numerically the fastest-growing among these groups are the **Hispanics**: in merely a decade, the number of Hispanics grew by over 11 million people, or 23%, so by now they **make up almost one-fifth of contemporary American society** with over 60 million people. If we focus on the rate of growth, the fastest growing race are **Asians**, whose **number grew by 35%**, or by more than 5 million people, and their overall population (20 million) is now about half of the total number of **blacks,** who grew far more modestly, by some 2 million people, to reach a total population of 41 million.

In contrast to these dynamically increasing racial groups, the **number of the "white alone" population has significantly declined in the 2010s**, by more than 8%, or over 19 million people. That does not mean that the overall number of whites has actually fallen so much, since over 31 million people identified themselves as "white and some other race", making up the overwhelming majority of the greatly expanded "Two or more races" category. It seems probable that a substantial portion of the American population have been more candid about their mixed racial heritage than before, and fewer people have identified themselves as exclusively white. However, if we distract from the total figure of "whites alone" those Hispanics who also identified themselves as white by race, the number of non-Hispanic whites is further reduced to less than 192 million, or 57.8% of the total US population. This is probably the consequence of the very low level of European immigration to the US, the low birth rate of American whites, and the aging of the white population, resulting in a higher death rate. **The roughly 58% proportion of non-Hispanic whites is the lowest ever in the history of the United States** and if this trend continues like that, **white Americans will cease to constitute the majority in American population by about 2040** (their proportion will fall below 50%) or even earlier, and there will no longer be a racial "majority" in the US, only a society of various minorities.

These national figures do not indicate how the various groups are represented in the individual regions, states, or cities. As might be expected, they are not evenly distributed across the nation. In the nation's largest state**, California, non-Hispanic whites are already a minority,** since they make up only 35% of the inhabitants there in 2020, whereas Hispanics represent 40% of the state: in that sense, California represents the potential future of the US. The situation is similar in **New Mexico** (36% white, 48% Hispanic) and in **Texas** (39% white, 39% Latino): all three Southwestern states are located along the Mexican border, so they are the primary targets of Hispanic immigration.

In contrast, some rural states in the northeast, the Midwest and the northern Rockies have still predominantly white populations: whites make up close to 90% of Maine, Vermont, and New Hampshire as well as West Virginia, and over 80% in Iowa, North Dakota, and Montana, but these are all sparsely populated states that attract little immigration.

African Americans still make up a substantial minority in many Southern states: in **Mississippi**, for example, they represent about 36 percent of the state's population, but

their proportion is over 30% in Louisiana and Georgia as well. In contrast, in the rural West, e.g. in Montana or Idaho, their population is less than 1 percent. In the nation's capital, **Washington, D.C., blacks** are no longer in absolute majority, but they **are still the largest racial group** with over 40 percent of the population.

Asians are the largest racial group in only one state, **Hawaii**, where they represent 37% of the population. Within the Continental US, California has the highest proportion of Asians, with 15% of the population. The largest Asian city in the US is **San Francisco**, where every third resident is of Asian origin. Native Americans make up 15% of Alaska's population, and 8% of South Dakota.

6.4. Ethnicity and ancestry

The ethnic background of the American population is even more difficult to survey than their racial identity. One method employed by the Census Bureau is to ask Americans about their birthplace: people who were born outside the United States are first-generation immigrants whose ethnic identity can be easily determined. A **2019 Census Bureau survey found 45 million foreign-born Americans (more than 13% of the total population),** which is the largest number in the history of the country, and the proportion of people born abroad was so high (13-15%) only between 1870 and 1920, the most intensive period of European immigration into the US.

A multiracial crowd in New York City (photo by Károly Pintér)

Exactly half of this huge immigrant community, 22.5 million people were born in Latin America, with about 27% (12 million) in Mexico. The next three largest source countries were China, India, and the Philippines, with about 2 million people (4%) each, and Asia was the birthplace of 14 million foreign-born people. European-born people altogether represented less than 5 million (10%) of all immigrants in the US. Another significant data is that **almost half of these people, 22 million are not naturalized American citizens**: they are either **legal aliens**

(having a permanent residency permit, also known in American slang as a "**green card**") or **illegal immigrants**, living and working in the United States without any official documents.

The ethnic background of people who were born in the United States can be determined with a lot less certainty, if at all. **Second-generation immigrants** (American-born children of immigrant parents) still tend to grow up in a family which has preserved a lot of the home culture of the parents: they often speak their non-English mother tongue at home, cook traditional food, observe cultural traditions, visit their home country. For many such children, their ethnic heritage can be a source of pride but also a source of problem, since they learn fluent, accent-free English in school, and often wish to integrate more seamlessly into American society, disliking the label of the "immigrant kid". They also have to navigate between their parents' culture and mainstream American culture, which may generate conflicts especially in teenage years, when they want to date others outside their community or mix with people their parents may disapprove of. The grandchildren's generation, however, tends to view themselves as more American than "ethnic" and often intermarry with people of different ethnic backgrounds, in which case their ethnic identity becomes distant and blurred, they gradually lose their "**hyphenated**" identity.[74]

This general model of social integration applies to the overwhelming majority of whites in American society, whose ancestors predominantly immigrated before 1920, therefore their connection to their ethnic ancestry is generally very distant. There are some persistent ethnic communities which maintain their ethnic community over many generations (e.g. Italian Americans, Polish Americans or Jews), but the majority has essentially melted into the white American "**melting pot**"[75] and only their surnames or their religion may signal their distant ethnic background.

[74] *hyphenated Americans*: Any ethnic or racial group in American society whose particular identity is expressed in a hyphenated double adjective, such as African-American, Asian-American, Italian-American, Polish-American, etc. The first part of the compound typically identifies the group's source country or continent, signaling their immigrant background, with the significant exception of African Americans, who never chose to move to North America, so in their case it suggests their ultimate land of origin.

[75] *melting pot*: a popular metaphor to describe the way the American nation was formed from a varied group of immigrant ethnic groups. The term originates from the title of a play by British author Israel Zangwill, which was first performed in 1909 to great success. Zangwill wanted to dramatize how ethnic and religious conflicts are overcome by the democratic equality of American society. The term has also been criticized, especially since the 1960s, as a false metaphor, since nonwhite groups were mostly excluded from the American "melting pot", which has, however, fused white immigrant ethnic groups successfully into one nation.

Recognizing this reality, the decennial censuses stopped asking people about where their parents were born, but the Census Bureau still regularly surveys people about their "**ancestry**" ("What is this person's ancestry or ethnic origin?") and let people decide what part of their often colorful ethnic background they wish to identify with.

Almost 24 million people (7%) identified their ancestry as "English" and another 20 million (6%) picked "American": this in practice means that they are unaware of any specific ethnic background or believe that they descend from colonial settlers from Britain. The largest specific ancestry group is "German": over 40 million (12%) identified with that ethnicity, followed by "Irish" (30 million, 9%), "Italian" (16 million, 5%) and "Polish" (9 million, 3%). This list rather faithfully identifies the largest immigrant communities of the middle and late 19th century, but most of these people are just as closely integrated into American society as those with "English" or "American" ancestry. For curiosity's sake: 1.3 million people picked "Hungarian" as their ancestry, representing 0.4% of the American population. The majority of these people, however, are also descendants of early 20th century immigrants, and have little actual connection to their ancestor's country and its culture.

6.5. Whites

White Americans still constitute the largest racial group within American society with about 204 million people in 2020 (including Hispanics declaring themselves whites regarding their race), and their absolute number has been growing steadily all through the 20th century, but **their proportion within the overall population has declined** from 87% in 1970 to 62% in 2010. If we discount white Hispanics, **the total number of non-Hispanic whites was just above 190 million and merely about 58% of American society in 2020.** This fact is due to two main reasons: the lower birth rate among white families (combined with the aging of the average white population) and the low level of white immigration in recent decades. After the Immigration Act of 1924 introduced national-origin quotas for European immigrants (see ch. 4.5 for details), mass white immigration was significantly restricted, and it was surpassed by Asian and Latin American immigration after World War II, which changed racial proportions considerably. The low level of recent European immigration to the US is illustrated by the

fact that out of the 45 million foreign-born people counted in 2019, less than 5 million were born in Europe (see subchapter 6.4).

Within the country, **the proportion of white population is the highest in rural states of the northern and mountainous regions of the US**. Whites make up 80% or more of the population in relatively sparsely populated states like **Maine**, Vermont and New Hampshire in New England, **Iowa** and North Dakota in the Midwest, Montana and Wyoming in the West, or **Kentucky** and **West Virginia** and in the South. Out of the regions, the **Midwest** and **New England** have the highest proportion (above 70%) of whites. In a simplified way, the proportion of whites gets smaller as one travels further south or closer to the coasts in the US. They make up hardly more than 20% of the population of Hawaii, and only every third resident of California or New Mexico is a white person. Whites are also in minority in Texas and Nevada, and altogether, they are less than half (48%) of the population of the entire West.

On the whole, **the white American population has become more homogeneous by the early 21st century**. Even though millions of white people register a wide range of ancestry on their census survey forms, they have far more distant connections to these ethnic groups and their cultures than their parents or grandparents had. The great majority of them are second-, third-, or fourth-generation immigrants, which means that they speak no other language than English and the ethnic traditions do not play an important role in their life. Simply speaking, they are far more American than German, Irish, Italian, Polish etc. in their cultural attitudes, not to mention the fact that many of them have mixed ancestry. Their ethnic background is largely an interesting curiosity for them or a romantic attachment to a faraway country they do not know much about.

The "Americanization" of white Americans who were still routinely distinguished in the mid-20th century as WASP, Irish, Italian, or Jewish, has also reduced or obliterated the cultural differences that once created a lot of distrust and hatred among various white ethnic groups. Catholic and Jewish whites have been accepted as equal members of society, and anti-Catholicism or anti-Semitism plays very little role in contemporary American public life. Perhaps the only ethnic and/or religious group that stands apart in today's white society are Arab and Muslim Americans, which is an unfortunate but logical consequence of the **September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks**.[76] Although classified as

[76] *September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks* (also known as "9/11"): Four coordinated attacks carried out by the Islamist terrorist group Al-Qaeda, whose members hijacked commercial airplanes and crashed two of them into the two towers of the World Trade Center in downtown Manhattan, and a third one into the Pentagon (the building of the

whites by census workers, they are viewed with suspicion by many "old Americans" and probably would describe themselves as a distinct group within, or apart from, white America.

In the 2010s, and particularly during the presidency of Donald Trump, **white nationalist** or white supremacist movements have stirred controversy in the United States. In 2015, a white man, Dylann Roof, burst into a Methodist church in Charleston, South Carolina, and shot 9 African American worshippers. During a white supremacist rally in 2017 in Charlottesville, Virginia, James Fields purposefully drove his car into a small crowd of peaceful counter-protesters, killing a woman and injuring dozens of others. President Trump added fuel to the fire when he refused to condemn the rally. These tragic events as well as several speeches and utterances by various advisers close to President Trump brought simmering white disaffection into sharp focus.

White nationalist views are rooted in the racist traditions of the American South: they often display their sympathies with slavery and suppression of American blacks by waving flags of the **Confederacy** during their rallies, and the **Ku Klux Klan**[77] is an active participant in the movement. They are convinced that whites are the only true representatives of American values and traditions, and have been alarmed by the declining proportion of whites in American population as well as the growing role of non-white people in national politics, for instance the victory of Barack Obama in 2008 presidential elections. They are typically extreme rightists in their political views: they strongly oppose immigration because they tend to believe that it is part of a wider left-wing conspiracy to marginalize and displace American whites. Anti-Semitic and Anti-Islamist views are also widespread. Most of these groups welcomed President **Donald**

Department of Defense) in Washington. A fourth plane was also headed for Washington, but the passengers rebelled against the hijackers and forced the plane to crash into a field in Pennsylvania. This was the largest terrorist incident on American soil: nearly 3000 people died, most of them trapped in the World Trade Center towers which ultimately collapsed due to the fire and the structural damage. The events on September 11 provoked a worldwide wave of shock, outrage, and sympathy for the United States, but much of the sympathy evaporated when the government of George W. Bush declared a "War on Terror" and, after invading Afghanistan in late 2001, where the leader of Al-Qaeda, Osama Bin-Laden was hiding, also attacked Iraq in 2003, which country had no proven connection to the terrorist attacks. This entangled the US in a prolonged and ultimately unsuccessful military conflict in the Middle East for two decades.

[77] *Ku Klux Klan:* A white supremacist secret organization that was originally created by Southern whites after their defeat in the Civil War in 1865 to terrorize newly liberated blacks as well as any whites who supported black equality. The Klan committed murders and assaults, and became infamous for the burning crosses they used to terrify people as well as the white hoods worn by Klan members during the attacks to hide their identity. After suppressed by federal authorities in the 1870s, the Klan was reorganized in the 1920s in the South as an extreme right-wing, racist society, not committed to violence so much but still promoting white supremacy as well as Anti-Semitic an Anti-Catholic views. They also tended to oppose immigration. The popularity of the Klan declined greatly after 1945 but they still exist in small and scattered groups in the US.

Trump's anti-immigration rhetoric and his unfulfilled promise of building a wall along the Mexican border to keep illegal immigrants out: Trump's utterances have encouraged white supremacists to bolder action, and they have essentially embraced Trump as their hero. It remains to be seen whether Trump's loss of the 2020 presidential election is going to marginalize these groups once again.

6.6. African Americans

According to the 2020 Census, **blacks make up more than 12% of American society, with over 41 million people. If one adds the number of those who listed 'black' as one of their racial identities, the proportion is over 14%, or 47 million people:** since American society has traditionally considered people with mixed racial ancestry 'black', the higher figure is perhaps more relevant. Their proportion is slightly higher than during most of the 20th century, but not significantly: in 1900, blacks already made up 11% of American society. The slight increase is due partly to the higher than average birth rate of African-American families, and partly to the immigration of blacks from Africa and the Caribbean.

Nearly half of all African Americans still live in the South. Blacks make up the largest minority in former slave-owning states: 36% in **Mississippi**, 31% in **Louisiana**, 30% in **Georgia**, 29% in Maryland, but their proportion is over 15% in many other southern states. In these states, they live both in urban and rural communities. **Outside the South, they are concentrated mostly in the inner cities of metropolitan areas.** Out of major US cities, African Americans constitute more than 50% of the population in **Detroit** (80%), **Memphis** (63%), Baltimore (60%), New Orleans (57%), and Cleveland, and they make up over 40% of Atlanta, St. Louis, Philadelphia, and **Washington D.C**. The lowest proportion of Blacks can be found in the rural states of the Midwest, the West and New England. If we consider absolute numbers instead of proportions, four states have a Black population above 3 million: Texas, Florida, Georgia, and New York, all of them highly urbanized states. The largest black city populations (over 500,000) can be found in Detroit, Memphis, Baltimore, and Houston.

It is a common mistake of Hungarian students to lump blacks together with other non-white racial minorities who have immigrated to the US relatively recently and consider

them yet another non-white "immigrant group". While their social circumstances and some of their problems are doubtless similar, the history of blacks is very different from Hispanics or Asians. **Blacks are historically the oldest racial minority in the US.** Between the early 17th and the early 19th centuries, millions of Blacks were captured in West Africa, brought to North America and sold as slaves. Many of them came not directly from Africa but from various Caribbean islands, where lots of slaves worked too. They were mostly employed in the large agricultural **plantations** (huge farms where typically only one kind of crop was grown, usually for sale, such as cotton, tobacco, or sugar cane) of the South, especially in the fertile coastal states – the **Deep South** – along the Atlantic Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico. In 1808, Congress banned the importation of slaves into the US, so afterwards the overwhelming majority of blacks were born in the country. As a result, **blacks are probably the most 'native' racial group in the present US after the Native Americans,** since most of their ancestors have lived in the country for more than two centuries – something the majority of whites cannot claim about themselves. Their mother tongue is exclusively English (though many speak it with a characteristic African-American accent) and their religion is typically Protestant Christian (the overwhelming majority of Southern blacks are Baptists), although there is a small Black Muslim church that sprang up in the 20th century.

How is it possible then that such an old minority is still disadvantaged in modern American society? The main reason is the centuries of slavery and racial discrimination by the white majority. The Civil War (1861-1865), the most devastating war in the history of the US, broke out exactly because Southern states seceded from the Union to preserve their economy and lifestyle based on slavery. The victory of the North brought an end to slavery in all the states. Three constitutional amendments were passed and ratified between 1865 and 1870. The **Thirteenth Amendment** abolished slavery, the **Fourteenth Amendment** gave blacks the rights of citizenship, and the **Fifteenth Amendment** gave them the right to vote.

Despite these constitutional changes, most blacks remained poor and uneducated, and official discrimination against them continued in all Southern states. One form of discrimination was **racial segregation**, or the physical separation of people of different races. Until the 1950s and 1960s, Blacks were not allowed into many public places such as restaurants, hotels, theaters, and schools, together with whites. There were separate railway carriages, buses, restrooms and facilities marked "colored only" for blacks, and they could be arrested and jailed if they entered places reserved for whites. Such state

laws that maintained and enforced racial segregation were popularly called **Jim Crow laws**.[78] This practice was legalized by the Supreme Court in 1896, when the Court ruled that racial segregation was legal as long as **"separate but equal"** facilities were provided. The landmark case ***Brown v. the Board of Education*** in 1954 was the first successful challenge to legalized segregation of blacks and whites. The Supreme Court unanimously ruled that maintaining separate but equal schools for blacks and whites was unconstitutional because separate schools can never provide the same educational opportunities (see chapter 11.5. for landmark cases of the Supreme Court).

There were other forms of racial discrimination: most Southern states had laws which were intended to prevent blacks from voting at elections (e.g. they were required to pass difficult literacy tests or had to pay a certain amount of poll tax which many poor blacks could not afford). Most rural blacks had no land on their own, therefore they usually worked as **sharecroppers**.[79] Others had low-paid manual jobs in the cities (e.g. factory workers, household servants, etc.). The better-paid and more respectable jobs were unavailable to them partly because they lacked the necessary skills and education, and partly because whites refused to work under a black boss. Because of the hopelessness of their situation, from the early 20th century more and more blacks, especially young males, decided to flee from the South and look for opportunities in the large industrial cities of the East Coast, the Midwest and the West. But they encountered unofficial discrimination in the north too: black **ghettos**[80] developed in most large American cities, e.g. in New York, Washington D.C., Philadelphia, Chicago, Los Angeles, and elsewhere. But outside the South, blacks were concentrated in big cities and hardly any lived in the countryside.

The social and political situation of African Americans changed dramatically as a result of the **civil rights movement**. The movement was a national campaign by African Americans in the 1950s and 60s to achieve equal civil rights for blacks in American society: they wanted to put an end to segregation, demanded fair housing, equal

[78] *Jim Crow laws*: The name of these racially discriminatory laws goes back to a popular clown character, Jim Crow, which was developed by popular white entertainer Thomas D. Rice in the early 19th century. The character was always played by Rice in blackface, dressed in rags, who danced and spoke in an exaggerated African-American accent.

[79] *sharecroppers*: poor peasants without land on their own, who sign a contract with a landowner to cultivate a plot of land and pay for it with a certain share (usually half) of the crop produced. The system of sharecropping in the Southern US produced cash crops like cotton, tobacco, or sugar, but the sharecropper was often forced to sell his share to the landlord at a reduced price, therefore they had no chance to rise out of poverty.

[80] *ghetto*: a district in a large city where predominantly one minority group lives, usually characterized by overcrowded conditions and shabby, run-down houses. The word originates from Italian, and was originally used for the segregated Jewish quarter in Venice.

employment opportunities, and fair voting laws for blacks. The movement used the methods of nonviolent resistance and demonstrations. Until his assassination in 1968, Baptist minister **Martin Luther King, Jr.** (1929–1968) provided leadership and strategy for the mass movement. He followed the example of the passive resistance of Mahatma Gandhi during the independence movement in India, and supported nonviolent tactics such as peaceful demonstrations, protest marches, boycotts of segregated facilities (e.g. public transportation where blacks had to sit at the back), and **"sit-ins"** at restaurants where blacks were not allowed. He was convinced that blacks can achieve their purposes best if they draw the nations' attention to the injustice of their social situation. He consistently called whites "brothers", and, despite numerous threats and attacks against him, he urged blacks to reject violence which would only incite hatred between races. Perhaps his most famous public appearance was in 1963, at the historic March on Washington D.C., where he delivered his **"I Have a Dream" speech**, a moving expression of his faith in universal human brotherhood. He was murdered by a racist white man in Memphis in 1968, causing nationwide shock and a huge wave of anger among blacks. King is one of the most widely respected historical figures in the US today, and his birthday is a national public holiday since 1986.

The National Civil Rights Museum in the building of the assassination of Martin Luther King in Memphis, Tennessee (photo by Károly Pintér)

The civil rights movement achieved important legal successes in the 1960s. Between 1963 and 1965, Congress prohibited the use of a poll tax and literacy tests in federal elections. The most important law was the **Civil Rights Act of 1964**, which forbade the administration of voting laws in a discriminatory manner, prohibited discrimination in public accommodations such as restaurants and hotels and also outlawed job discrimination by employers and unions. As a result of these new laws, voter registration among blacks has significantly increased. More and more blacks have been elected to public office, for example mayors of large cities, or Representatives in federal Congress.

There were other, more controversial laws and government policies in the 1960s that were meant to eliminate or compensate for discrimination. In the area of employment, the government has tried to correct job discrimination through **affirmative action** programs. The term itself comes from legal language and it means something like 'positive action' to correct wrongdoings of the past. The government programs under that name required government employers (e.g. federal agencies) and encouraged private ones to hire and promote more blacks, women, and members of other disadvantaged groups who had been given fewer opportunities in the past. The ideal purpose of affirmative action was that the proportion of blacks and women in important position (e.g. in government offices, among college graduates, university professors, among business leaders etc.) should approach their overall proportion in society. Supporters of the policy insisted that some form of **preferential treatment** is necessary to compensate for historical disadvantages and also to break down the negative prejudices and long-standing discrimination against minorities and women in the job market. Critics of affirmative action condemned it as a form of **reverse discrimination** against white males, whereas the correct purpose of such a program should be non-discrimination against any social group.

Affirmative action programs have been repeatedly attacked in federal courts as unconstitutional, and the Supreme Court has passed several decisions about such cases. The Court has declared fixed quotas (that is, a certain number of college places or jobs reserved exclusively for disadvantaged groups) unconstitutional, but did not reject the principle of affirmative action, ruling that race and gender may legally considered a "factor" in the selection of applicants.

There is no doubt that the social situation of blacks has significantly improved since the 1960s. More blacks have attained middle-class jobs, more hold elected political positions, more own their homes, more live in the suburbs. Improved educational opportunities have been a key factor in these changes: in 1960 the proportion of high school graduates was only half as much among blacks as among whites, and by 2019 this difference has been reduced to 87% among blacks versus 93% among non-Hispanic whites. But the disadvantages still show among college graduates: only 23% of blacks have college degree as opposed to 37% of non-Hispanic whites. Part of the reason probably is that many blacks cannot afford the high tuition in higher education.

The disparities continue remain wide in income and employment. The median income of blacks has increased from $18,700 in 1970 to $31,100 in 2016, but the difference between

these figures and the median income of whites ($31,500 in 1970 and $48,000 in 2016) remained large, and the proportion between median black and white income increased from 59% merely to 64% in almost 50 years. According 2019 data, about 19% of all blacks lived below the official **poverty line**, which is almost three times the proportion among non-Hispanic whites or Asians (7%). Poverty is even more common among African-American children: about 25% of them live in poverty (typically because they tend to live in large families).

African American families in a park in downtown Chicago (photo by Károly Pintér)

Part of the reason for poverty is the lack of stable black families. 64% of all black children are born to unmarried mothers, and there are over 4 million single-parent black families in the US. Inner-city young blacks are often involved in illegal drug trade and they join criminal gangs that often fight among themselves. As a result, the leading cause of death among young black men between 15 and 35 is murder. In 2008, 1 in 15 black adults were imprisoned, but the same rate for young back males aged 20 to 34 is 1 in 9, four times higher than the rate among Hispanic adults and more than ten times higher than among whites. The poverty and unemployment among America's urban blacks are reminders that inequalities have not been eliminated.

6.7. Hispanics (Latinos)

According to the 2020 census data, the total number of Hispanics has passed 62 million, which means **nearly 19 percent of the total US population, the largest minority after the majority group of non-Hispanic whites**. They are also **the fastest growing minority group in the nation**: their number has nearly doubled since 2000 and increased by over 11 million additional people in the last ten years. This spectacular growth is due primarily to intensive immigration from Latin America, but the birth rate of Hispanic families is also among the highest in the US, so their proportion is even larger among the school-age population.

Hispanics have a long history in the Southwestern region of the US, especially in New Mexico, California, and Texas, where the earliest European settlements were founded by Spanish colonizers in the 17th and 18th centuries. After the United States conquered these areas in the Mexican War of 1846–48, English-speaking settlers moved into the region, and the original Hispanic inhabitants soon became outnumbered by the '**Anglos**' (the term for English-speaking non-Hispanic whites in the region). Spanish-speaking colonies came under US control after the Spanish-American War in 1898, when Cuba and Puerto Rico in the Caribbean as well as the Philippines in the Western Pacific were taken from Spain, but the inhabitants of these countries did not immigrate to the US until the second half of the 20th century.

The proportion of Hispanics remained insignificant in the US until the end of World War II. Migrant Mexican workers regularly crossed the border north to work on farms, especially during harvest time, but most of them returned home with their earnings. They provided cheap and hard-working labor force for American farmers, therefore the restrictive immigration laws passed in the 1920s did not apply to the movement of people from the American continent (see ch. 4.5. and 4.6. for details), encouraging more Mexicans to come. Large-scale immigration began after the war, when Mexicans were attracted by the job opportunities in the prospering economies of California and Texas. They were followed by Hispanics from the Caribbean and the Philippines. The overall number grew very quickly: the 1980 census (the first one that asked people about Hispanic origin) counted almost 15 million Hispanics, or more than 6% of US population at the time. Their growth trend has remained steady ever since.

The largest group among Hispanics is the **Mexican Americans** (formerly called Chicanos, but it is considered an offensive term nowadays). Many of them have entered the US illegally, crossing the long U.S.-Mexican border at unguarded points. These **illegal aliens** work on farms at harvest time, on construction sites, as household servants, janitors, gardeners, or in other hard and menial physical jobs Americans avoid. Mexican Americans are heavily concentrated along the Mexican border: they make up nearly 40% of the population of **California**, where they are the largest single group (that means more than 15 million people) and **Texas** (over 11 million), while in sparsely populated **New Mexico**, they constitute almost half of the state's 2 million people. In the entire region of the **West**, every third person is Hispanic. Among all the registered Hispanic residents of the US, about 60 percent (37 million) are of Mexican origin, and there are probably millions more who live in the US illegally.

Mexicans do not integrate easily or quickly into American society for several reasons. They tend to live in their own communities, separate **Latino** neighborhoods in larger cities, where they continue speaking **Spanish**, watching Spanish TV channels, and interact relatively little with the English-speaking majority when not at work. They also have a strong pride in their own culture, maintain family ties to Mexico, and typically marry among themselves. The general integration patterns, however, work for Mexicans too: the kids become **bilingual** in school by learning fluent English, and they often decide to depart from the immigrant traditions of their parents. This is becoming more difficult in areas where Latinos make up the absolute majority of the population, for instance in many small towns next to the Mexican border, where English-speaking population is scarce.

In the past decade, especially after the global economic recession of 2008-2009, the rate of Mexican immigration declined significantly, because job opportunities in the depressed US economy became scarce in the early 2010s, while many American companies moved their factories and other production units to Mexico to benefit from the lower wages. For a short period, there occurred an unprecedented reverse migration, when more Mexican illegal immigrants moved back to Mexico than the amount crossing the border in the US! However, the shortfall of Mexican immigration has been recently replaced by migrants coming from other small Central American countries, e.g. El Salvador, Guatemala, or Honduras.

Another significant source country for Hispanic immigrants is **Puerto Rico**, a small island in the Caribbean, which is a possession of the U.S., so **Puerto Ricans are all US**

citizens, not immigrants in a legal sense. After World War II, large numbers moved to New York (as a result, Latinos constitute about 20% of the population of **New York State** and New Jersey today) and other large cities in the Northeast and the Midwest. In 2019, they made up almost 10% of the total Hispanic population of the US, which means nearly 6 million people, but that figure includes all those who live on the island too: more than 3 million people inhabit Puerto Rico, practically all of them Latinos, but emigration to the Continental US is a constant phenomenon, so the population has actually shrunk by more than 400,000 people there between 2010 and 2020.

Another easily distinguishable group is the **Cuban Americans**, who are concentrated in southern **Florida**, mostly in **Miami**, not far from their land of origin. Most of them arrived in the United States as political refugees after Fidel Castro came into power in Cuba in 1959 and established a Communist regime there, and they were forced to flee from their homeland. A significant proportion of these refugees were wealthy middle- and upper-class people who have brought some of their money and their education with them. **Cubans are by far the most wealthy and prosperous among Hispanics**: they have integrated successfully into American society while keeping their cultural roots. They are predominantly conservative in their political preferences, voting Republican, and often pressure the US government to maintain economic sanctions against Communist Cuba. In 2019, they made up about 4% of the total Hispanic population of the US. The rest of the Hispanics trace their ancestry back to various Central or South American countries.

The regional distribution of Hispanics is very uneven. California, Texas, Florida, and New York (the four largest states by population) together account for almost 60% of the total Hispanic population of the US. **Hispanics are highly urbanized**: more than 90% of them live in **metropolitan areas**, and almost 50% live in inner cities (as opposed to suburbs). As their overall numbers grow steadily, they also move into other states in search of jobs, and their proportion is over 10% of the population in several states on the East Coast, the Midwest and the South, e.g. Illinois, Massachusetts or Georgia. Hispanics are the least characteristic of the rural Midwest, South, and New England, where their proportion is below 5% in states like Kentucky, Maine, or Mississippi.

As it can be seen from these data, Hispanics are concentrated in urban areas, especially in central cities, where, similarly to blacks, they tend to form ethnic neighborhoods. These areas face similar problems to those of black inner-city neighborhoods: bad, decaying houses, poor schools, few job opportunities, and high crime rates. **Hispanics have the**

poorest educational attainment among all the major groups in US society: about 30% of Hispanics have no high school diploma, while the same figure among whites is below 10%, and only 18% have earned at least a Bachelor's degree in college, compared to 37% of non-Hispanic whites. The school problems of Hispanic children are increased by the fact that their mother tongue is not English (more than 70% of Hispanic children speak Spanish at home), therefore they face serious difficulties in basic communication tasks.

They also tend to make much less money than the society average: their median income grew from $22,400 to $30,400 between 1970 and 2016, which means that their median income grew more slowly than that of blacks (who overtook them by the mid-2010s) and remains far below that of whites. The most probable explanation to this fact is that the ranks of Hispanics are continually swollen by very poor immigrants, and they pull averages down even if their financial circumstances improve over time. 17% of Hispanic families lived under the official poverty line in 2020, which is more than twice the proportion among whites (8%).

The increase of Hispanic immigration during the last 40 years has had a dramatic impact on American society, particularly in the Southwest where the greatest settlement has occurred. **Spanish has become a major language all along the border,** including Southern California and Texas, and some cities are officially bilingual. Because most Hispanics hold onto their language and customs, many Americans are worried about the 'invasion' of Hispanics because they fear that the country's cultural and linguistic identity is endangered. Supporters of the Republican Party have long advocated tougher border control to curb illegal immigration, arguing that illegal immigrants bring poverty and crime into the country, participate in the drug trade across the border, and drive down wages because they are willing to work for very low pay. Although it is less often mentioned, probably many people also oppose immigration because they feel that the cultural dominance of the Anglos is threatened.

The issue dominated national politics during the presidency of Donald Trump who made it a central promise of his campaign to build a wall along the Mexican border to keep illegal immigrants out, but practically nothing came out of it: only some existing parts of the metal barrier (it is not actually a wall) were renovated and strengthened. Despite all government efforts, the stream of illegal immigration across the Mexican border continues with a varying intensity.

6.8. Asian Americans

In 2020, **Asian Americans made up 6 percent of the American population, with about 20 million people**. If we add all those who added "Asian" as one of their races, the total proportion is over 7%, or 24 million, the highest number ever in the history of the United States. Their number has grown by 35% in 10 years, which shows a high level of immigration from Asia.

The history of Asian-American immigration to the US reaches back to the 1850s, when cheap and hard-working Chinese laborers were attracted to California by the gold rush and by the building of the transcontinental railway. They were followed by smaller groups of Japanese. Asian immigrants were treated with widespread hostility by whites: in 1882 Chinese immigration was effectively banned and Japanese immigration was also subsequently restricted (see ch. 4.4. for details). One of the last instances of official racial prejudice occurred in 1942 when, following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the federal government deported more than 110,000 **Japanese Americans** – 70,000 of whom were born in the US – living on the West Coast to "relocation centers" in Arizona, Wyoming and other desolate areas in the West, since they were considered "security risks", although none of them committed anything illegal. These actions were deemed constitutional by the Supreme Court at the time, but they were explicitly disavowed by Chief Justice John G. Roberts in 2018.

After World War II, other Asian countries (Korea, Vietnam, India, the Philippines etc.) gave the majority of immigrants to the US. According to 2019 survey data, the two largest Asian communities are the **Chinese** (22%) and the **Indians** (21%), numbering over 4 million people each, followed by **Filipinos** (15%, 3 million), **Vietnamese** (9%, 1.9 million) and **Koreans** (7%, 1.5 million).

The greatest concentration of Asian Americans can be found in the West Coast: they make up 15% of the population of **California**, which means nearly 6 million people (or 30% of the total Asian population in the US), and nearly 10% of **Washington state** (over 700,000). San Francisco, home of the oldest Chinatown in the US, has the highest proportion of Asians among large cities. Asians – mostly Japanese – also constitute more than one-third of the population of Hawaii (about 500,000 people).

Outside this region, the largest proportion of Asians can be found in large urban centers on the East Coast, e.g. in in **New York** and New Jersey (10% each, almost 3 million people), East Coast university towns (e.g. Massachusetts, home state of Harvard University, has the third highest proportion of Asian population with 7%, which means 500,000 people), or near the federal capital of Washington D.C. (Virginia has 7% Asian population, or about 600,000 people).

The collective term "Asian-American" hides a huge ethnic variety within this category, since each of the above groups speaks different languages, and has different cultural traditions. Perhaps the only common feature among Asians is their determination to fit into and succeed in American society: although there are Asian ethnic neighborhoods, especially along the West Coast, where the majority of them have settled, they are far less characteristic than similar Hispanic communities. Asians work hard to master the language, start independent businesses, run shops and restaurants, and encourage their children to speak perfect English and excel at school. **Asians have been very successful in higher education**: more than half (56%) of them had a college degree in 2019, compared to 37% of non-Hispanic whites.

On the whole, the majority of Asians have integrated into the American middle class far more successfully than either blacks or Hispanics. Their median income is higher than any other racial group: it was $51,300 in 2016, significantly higher than that of whites ($48,000), which is an interesting illustration of how different cultural backgrounds determine the social success of different immigrant groups who otherwise all started out as poor and disadvantaged people in the United States. The spectacular difference between the economic fortunes and social integration of Asians and other non-white groups have earned them the name "**model minority**" by some social scientists.

6.9. Native Americans

In the 2020 census, about 3.7 million people were identified as American Indians tribal members (American Indian, Alaskan Inuits, and others), representing 1.1% of American population, while another 6 million identified Indian as one of their racial identities. The latter group is surprisingly large, since little more than 2 million people identified themselves as partly Native American in 2010. Rather than suspecting a sudden wave of

intermarriages between Native Americans and other races, this figure seems to suggest that significantly more Americans feel comfortable or even proud to declare their partial Native American heritage to census workers. However, the Native American population is more faithfully represented by the "Native American alone" data. This small population is divided into more than 300 different tribes in the continental U.S. and some 200 tribes, groups, bands, and villages in Alaska. Most of these tribes and groups have very few members.

The great majority of Native Americans live in the West, where most of their **federal reservations** are located. These reservations were created by the federal government during the late 19th century, and they forced Native American tribes to relocate there, abandoning their original home territories. The reservations remained under direct federal control long after, which made Native Americans segregated and virtually imprisoned in these distant and mostly barren areas. They were unable to continue their traditional nomadic lifestyle and lived in great poverty under federal government control, dependent on the food provisions of the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs. The government made efforts to assimilate the Indians to white America: Christian missionaries opened boarding schools for Indian children outside the reservations, and the adults were given individual land allotments to turn them into farmers. They only received US citizenship in 1924, and forceful assimilation policies were gradually abandoned.

None of them is forced to stay on a reservation any more, and an increasing number decide to move to larger metropolitan areas in search of jobs and careers. Only 10 percent of the Indian reservations have 5,000 or more Indians. The largest is the **Navajo Indian Reservation** which covers over 70,000 km² in the southwestern states of Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah, and has about 170,000 Navajo tribal members living on it, while the total number of the Navajo Nation is about 400,000. The Navajo reservation is one of the rare examples where the Native Americans were left to stay close to their original homeland (primarily because it is a semi-desert area unattractive to white settlers). The largest proportion of Native Americans is found in sparsely populated **Alaska**, where they constitute 15 percent of the population, or about 100,000 people. In terms of absolute numbers, the largest Native American populations live in **Oklahoma** (over 300,000, representing 8% of the state's population), home of the **Cherokee Nation**, the second largest tribe after the Navajo; **Arizona** (270 000, 3,7%), and **New Mexico** (190 000, 9%). They also make up more than 5% of sparsely populated South Dakota and Montana in the northwest.

Young Native Americans who lived in cities observed the success the civil right movement of blacks, founded the American Indian Movement (AIM) in 1968 to encourage Native American cultural identity and draw attention to the past injustices suffered by Indians as well as their present poverty and social problems. They demanded reforms that would give political autonomy to Native American groups and recognize their special cultural needs. Between 1969 and 1973, Indian activists organized several demonstrations to capture public attention (e.g. they occupied Alcatraz island in San Francisco Bay). These efforts have brought a greater degree of sovereignty: the federal government and the federal courts recognized that Native American tribes have special rights on their territories, they do not belong under the state governments. This enabled some tribes to start successful business ventures, for example open **casinos** in states where **gambling** was otherwise illegal, and improve living conditions, open new schools, hospitals, museums from the income. Tourism is another important source of income, and Native American literature and culture has undergone a revival in the past decades. Despite these improvements, many rural Native Americans continue to live in poverty, due mainly to the lack of job opportunities in their remote territories. This is reflected in the low educational attainment of Native Americans: while over 80% finished high school (which is free and available locally), only 16% had a college degree in 2019, since higher education requires enough money to pay for tuition and compels them to move away from home.

6.10. Key terms and concepts

common language
ethnic group / ethnicity
foreign-born
green card
identity
illegal immigrant
legal alien
nation
race
racial segregation
racism
religious identity
social construction

Whites:
9/11 / September 11, 2001
ancestry
Confederate flag
hyphenated American
Iowa
Kentucky
Ku Klux Klan

Maine
melting pot
Midwest
New England
non-Hispanic white
second-generation immigrant
Trump, Donald
West Virginia
white nationalism / nationalist
white supremacy / supremacist

Blacks:
13th Amendment
14th Amendment
15th Amendment
affirmative action
Brown v. Board of Education
Civil Rights Act (1964)
civil rights movement
Deep South
Detroit
Georgia
ghetto
I Have a Dream speech
Jim Crow laws
King, Martin Luther
Louisiana
Memphis
Mississippi (state)
Obama, Barack
one-drop rule
plantation
poverty line
preferential treatment
racial segregation
reverse discrimination
separate but equal
sharecropper
sit-in
Washington D.C.

Hispanics:
Anglos
bilingual
California
Catholicism / Catholic religion
Cuban American
cultural origin group
Florida
illegal alien / immigrant
Latino / Latina
Mexican Americans
Miami
New Mexico
New York
Puerto Rico / Puerto Rican
Spanish (language)
Texas
West (region)

Asians:
California
Chinese American
Filipino American
Hawaii
Indian American
Japanese American
Korean American
model minority
New York State
San Francisco
Vietnamese American

Washington State
West Coast

Native Americans:
Alaska
Arizona
casino
Cherokee Nation
gambling
Navajo Nation
New Mexico
Oklahoma
reservation

7. American Government Part I: The Constitution and Congress

7.1. The US Constitution

The **Constitution** (https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/constitution) is the fundamental law of the United States of America. Its original version was drafted by a group of statesmen in 1787 in Philadelphia, who are usually called **Founding Fathers** or **Framers** in the American historical tradition (see ch. 2.3. about the meaning of this concept).

A parchment copy of the handwritten version of the original Constitution of 1788 (photo by Károly Pintér)

The original intentions of the Founding Fathers were the following:

- **To create a stronger national government** than the one existing at the time, with substantial independence from state governments and superior authority over them.

- To harmonize two conflicting requirements: the essential equality of the member states and the democratic representation of the people of the US (some states were densely populated, while others small in territory or in population).

- To **prevent the development of a tyrannical, all-powerful central government** by limiting both the authority of the central government and the individual branches of power within it.

These objectives were often in contradiction, therefore the ultimate framework of the Constitution has been produced by a series of compromises. The two key principles determining the present shape of the Constitution are the **separation of powers** and **federalism**.

Separation of powers means that the federal government is divided into three separate branches – the **legislative**, the **executive** and the **judicial branch** – each of which is represented by a specific institution. The **three branches of power** are separated from one another, which means that the members of each branch gain their position separately and exercise their authority independently. **Nobody is allowed to be a member of any two branches of power at the same time.** This way, the Founding Fathers wanted to make sure that none of the three branches can concentrate too much power in their hands and suppress the other two. They even included a special system of **checks and balances** (rules by which one branch can control and limit the power of another) into the Constitution as a further protection 'against tyranny'.

Federalism means that the federal government shares political power with state governments. Both the federal government and the various states have their own specific functions and authorities, which should be mutually respected. Therefore the Constitution made a clear distinction between federal and state powers by specifying what powers belong to the federal government.

Each of the three branches of power is represented by one institution: **Congress** is the legislative body, the **President** exercises all executive powers, and the **Supreme Court** is the highest judicial authority. Congress consists of two houses (also called a bicameral legislature): the lower house is called **House of Representatives**, and the upper house is called **Senate**. Both houses are elected, but in a different way and for different periods of time (see below). The President is elected independently from Congress. The legislative and the executive branches are forced to cooperate in order to govern the country: the mutual powers exercised by Congress to limit the President and the President to limit Congress are all parts of checks and balances and will be described in detail in subchapter 7.2.

The Constitution described the powers and authority of the Supreme Court in a lot less detailed way than those of Congress and the President; most importantly, it is not specified in the Constitution how the Supreme Court can check and balance the other two branches of power. Subsequently, such a power was created by the Court itself, in the form of **judicial review**.

President cannot force Congress to pass legislation they do not want to; on the other hand, he has the right to **veto bills of Congress** he disagrees with. The President can exercise executive power with a great amount of liberty, but all his major appointments and his most crucial decisions (e.g. declaration of war) must be approved by Congress.

Besides describing the three branches of powers and their scope of authority, the Constitution also provided a way to change or modify its own content. It allowed Congress with a two-thirds majority, or two-thirds of all the states, to propose so-called **amendment**s (modifying clauses) to the Constitution. Each of these amendments must be **ratified** (accepted) by three-fourth of all states in order to become part of the Constitution. This way, the Founding Fathers made it possible for subsequent generations to modernize the Constitution and harmonize it with future political and social necessities.

Soon after the Constitution itself was ratified in 1788 and the first Congress convened in 1789, ten amendments were passed by Congress and ratified by enough of the states by 1791. These ten amendments, collectively called **Bill of Rights,**[81] contained those individual rights of the citizens of the US which must not be restricted or denied by either the federal or the state governments. Although the Bill of Rights was passed slightly later than the original Constitution, it was so close in time that most people consider it part of the original text.

Since then, the Constitution has been amended 17 more times, so altogether there are currently 27 Amendments to the Constitution. One of them, however, is no longer valid:

[81] *Bill of Rights* (ratified 1791): The first 10 amendments to the US Constitution, which were passed by Congress and ratified by the states together. These amendments were created by the first Congress to guarantee the civil rights of American citizens that must not be restricted by the newly created federal government. The First Amendment is perhaps the most famous of them, containing the rights of the freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of religion, freedom of assembly (or peaceful demonstration) and the separation of church and state. The Second Amendment guarantees the right of Americans to keep and bear arms. Amendments 4 to 8 are mostly concerned with the protection of the rights of people who are in police custody or accused of criminal acts. While the original Bill of Rights restricted the federal government only and did not apply to state and local governments, decisions of the Supreme Court during the 20th century gradually enforced these rights against all levels of government.

the 18th Amendment, which was passed in 1919 and made the production and sale of alcoholic drinks illegal in the US, was repealed in 1933.

The American Constitution is the oldest fundamental legal document in the world; even though the United States has changed beyond recognition since the ratification of the Constitution more than 230 years ago, and the document itself has been amended in several important ways (e.g. slavery was abolished, women received the right to vote, Senators became elected), **the fundamental structure of the federal government is still determined by the Founding Fathers' ideas**. Most Americans are very proud of their Constitution, they consider it one of the greatest creations in the history of humanity and admire the document with an almost religious awe. There has never been any serious movement or effort to repeal or overthrow the Constitution in American history: it has survived a brutal Civil War as well as two world wars and other national crises unharmed. Its endurance is a symbol of the stability and longevity of the United States itself.

Some constitutional scholars and political scientists, however, have long **criticized certain aspects of the Constitution**: the election of the President is vague and essentially undemocratic as it is written down in the text; states with a small population are overrepresented in the Senate; the entire American party system is extra-constitutional in the sense that the Constitution does not contain a single word about "parties". While these critical remarks are doubtless valid, the constitutional order is protected in the US by the difficulty of passing constitutional amendments: unless both parties support it and the overwhelming majority of state legislatures are also behind it, the Constitution cannot be modified, and no such amendment has been passed for 30 years.

7.2. The federal legislature: US Congress

The **US Congress** (https://www.congress.gov/) represents one of the three branches of power in the federal government of the United States. The rules governing the election and operation of Congress are contained in Article I of the US Constitution. Congress occupies the huge and impressive building of the **Capitol** in Washington D.C. Since the

building stands on a small hill, journalists and commentators often refer to Congress as '**Capitol Hill**'.

Congress possesses all **legislative power**s in the **federal government**. It consists of two legislative houses: the lower house is called **House of Representatives** (https://www.house.gov/), and the upper house is called **Senate** (https://www.senate.gov/). Each house has a different representative function: the Founding Fathers imagined **the House of Representatives to represent the people of the US, while the Senate was meant to represent the member states** in the federal legislature.

View of the US Capitol (photo by Károly Pintér)

The members of the House of Representatives (who are simply called **representatives**) are elected by the citizens of the US. The territory of each state is divided into **congressional districts** with roughly equal number of voters, and each district elects one Representative into the House every two years. Each Representative must be at least 25 years old and must live in the state in which he or she has been elected.

In 1911, an Act of Congress fixed **the total number of Representatives in the House at 435**. Since the population of the US is continuously growing, and some states attract

far more people than others, the fair and equal distribution of Representatives among the states requires a regular **reapportionment**, or a new allocation of how many representatives is given to each state. Every ten years, following a national **census** (counting of the population), the number of Representatives is redistributed among the states to reflect the changes in their population. There is one limit set by the Constitution: **even the smallest states must have at least one representative**, regardless of how small their population is. The latest apportionment was made after the 2020 Census: the largest state by population, California, has 52 representatives, while 6 states have only one (for details, see ch. 9.4, "Congressional Elections").

The members of the **Senate** (who are called **senator**s) are nowadays also elected by the voters of the state they represent, but this has not always been the normal way. The logic of the Founding Fathers was that the Senate represents the states of the US, therefore Senators should be chosen by the legislature of the state they will represent. This remained the general practice during the 19th century, but the 17th Amendment in 1913 made the popular election of Senators compulsory in all the states.

Nonetheless, the most important principle remained the same: **in the Senate, all states are equal, because each state has two senators, elected for six years**. Since the US has consisted of 50 states since 1959 (when Alaska and Hawaii became states), it is easy to work out that **the Senate has exactly 100 members**. Both senators are elected by all the voters of the state, but always in a different election year, because only one-third of the Senate is re-elected every second year, when Congressional elections are held. Senators must be at least 30 years old and must live in the state they represent in the Senate.

The two houses of Congress are equal in legislative power: both of them must approve all **bill**s before they can be sent to the President for signature. They have different roles in the **impeachment** procedure (for details, see ch. 8.2, "President and Congress"). There are a few signs, however, indicating that **the Founding Fathers wished to give the Senate slightly more power and influence than the House**. For instance, the Senate was given the power to approve the appointments made or foreign treaties signed by the President, while the House has nothing to do with them. Also, Senators are elected for long terms and usually by a much larger number of voters, which gives them more prestige and respect. Many experienced Senators are well-known politicians nationwide, while few Representatives are recognized outside their state or even their district.

The two chambers of Congress have their own procedural rules and their own leaders. **The House of Representatives elects a Speaker**, who is always the leader of the party which has a majority in the House. The **chairman of the Senate is always the Vice President**, but he or she cannot vote unless there is a tie. When the Vice President is not present, he or she is substituted by the eldest member of the Senate, who is officially called President pro Tempore. But the most influential politician of the Senate is neither the Vice President nor the President pro Tempore, but the so-called **majority leader**, who is the leader of the party that has majority in the upper house.

Kamala Harris, the chairman of the Senate as Vice President (since 2021)[82]

Both chambers have a number of **committees**, which are smaller groups of representatives or senators specializing on one particular policy area, for example the budget, commerce, education, or foreign policy. Whenever a member proposes a bill or other measure, it is first referred to the appropriate committee, which is always **bipartisan**, that is, both parties are represented in it. If the majority of the committee supports the bill, then it may go before the whole house, but if they vote it down, it has "died in committee", as the American political slang puts it. The chairs of the House or the Senate committees are among the most influential and respectable members of the two chambers.

The legislative powers of Congress are not unlimited: one of the fundamental doctrines of the Constitution called **federalism** requires that there should be separate spheres in which states retain their authority to create their own laws as long as they do not conflict with federal laws. However, the Constitution also specifies a number of areas where Congress explicitly has the power to make laws. Such areas include:

- Finance and trade: Congress can coin money and determine its value, borrow money for the purposes of the federal government, impose uniform taxes and

[82] Source of photo: https://www.whitehouse.gov/administration/vice-president-harris/

duties all over the US, regulate commerce both inside the country and with other nations;

- Citizenship: Congress can determine the rules of **naturalization** (how someone can become a citizen of the US);
- Communication: Congress maintains the postal service and can build post roads (Of course, today it includes all other forms of communication too, including radio and television frequencies and the internet);
- Economy: Congress can determine bankruptcy laws and protect the interest of inventors and authors (patent and copyright laws);
- Defense: Congress can declare war, set up and maintain an army, a navy and a militia (volunteer armed force to protect against internal unrest and riots; today it is called the National Guard);
- Government of **federal lands**: Congress has exclusive legislative control over the federal capital (Washington D.C.) and any other federal land that does not belong to any states, including all National Parks and other federal possessions.

The Constitution left it unclear whether Congress may pass laws regarding other areas not specified by the text. In the 19th century, the Constitution was typically interpreted in a restricted way, which means that Congress can only make law in those areas listed by the Constitution. After the Civil War, a more expansive interpretation gained ground, which construed the areas above as examples rather than an exclusive list. During the 1930s, the efforts to combat the Great Depression were also undertaken mostly by the federal government under the administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt, and the **New Deal** program resulted in more federal agencies and increased federal power. As a result, **Congress has gained a lot of power at the expense of the state legislatures** during the last 150 years. Some American conservatives strongly criticize this trend, which they call "**big government**" (referring to the federal government), and advocate that the states' legislative autonomy should be respected (which they often call "**states' rights**").

Progressives typically respond to such criticism with arguments that the United States has changed beyond recognition since the late 18th century, and a modern country can no longer be governed the way the Founding Fathers imagined, leaving everyday matters

mostly to the states. People travel a lot between states, modern telecommunication knows no state boundaries, the economy of the whole country is closely interconnected, national security is also much more difficult to protect than earlier, and all these aspects make a strong national government necessary.

7.3. Key terms and concepts

3 branches of power / government
amendment
big government
bill
Bill of Rights
bipartisan
Capitol Hill
census
checks and balances
committee
Congress
Congressional district
executive (branch of govt)
federal government
federal land
federalism
Founding Fathers
Framers
House of Representatives
impeachment
judicial (branch of govt)
judicial review
legislative (body / branch of govt)
legislative power
majority leader (of the House / Senate)
naturalization
New Deal
President
ratify / ratification
reapportionment
representative
Senate
senator
separation of powers
Speaker (of the House)
states' rights
Supreme Court
veto
Vice President

8. American Government Part II: the President

The President (https://www.whitehouse.gov/) represents the **executive branch of power** in the federal government of the United States. The rules governing the election and functions of the President are contained in Article II of the US Constitution. The official residence of the President is the **White House** in Washington D.C.

The White House in Washington D.C. (photo by Károly Pintér)

The President possesses all executive powers in the federal government. He is the only person in the government to be elected by the entire nation, therefore his prestige and respect is unique in the US. He is elected for four years together with a **Vice President**, who takes over his job if the President dies, resigns, is removed from office, or becomes unable to exercise his duties. He must be at least 35 years old and a natural-born citizen of the United States (which means that the presidency is the only federal office unavailable to first-generation immigrants).

Joe Biden, Vice President of the US between 2009–2017, and President since 2021[83]

8.1. The President's powers

Compared to European parliamentary systems of government, the President combines two distinct functions: he is both the head of state and the chief executive officer (the head of government) of the United States; as if the British monarch and the Prime Minister, or the Hungarian President of the Republic and the Prime Minister were rolled into one very powerful person. As a result, he has a wide range of powers, which could be categorized as follows:

As head of state, the President has the exclusive right to

- **turn bills** approved by both houses of Congress **into law**, or **Acts of Congress**. The Constitution gives him **veto** power over bills of Congress, that is, **he may refuse to sign any bill he does not like** (such a wide power to reject legislation

[83] Source of photo: https://www.whitehouse.gov/administration/president-biden/

is not possessed by either the British monarch or the Hungarian President). The President has ten days to decide whether to sign or veto; if he does not act at all, the bill automatically becomes law, without the President's approval. If he vetoes, **Congress may override his veto** by passing the same bill again with two-thirds majority in both houses. In such a case, the President can no longer prevent the bill from becoming law, but a two-thirds majority in both houses is very difficult to achieve in Congress, therefore the President's veto is normally the end of the road for that bill.

- **appoint all major federal officials**, including all federal judges, all the members of the President's Cabinet, all foreign ambassadors, all the directors of federal agencies and other organizations, etc. In parliamentary systems, such appointments are formally made by the monarch or the president, but the actual persons are chosen and recommended by the Prime Minister. The US President both chooses his candidates for the various positions and appoints them, with one single limitation: **his appointments must be approved by the majority of the Senate**.
- exercise a number of less significant powers: he can give pardons for federal offenses, receives foreign ambassadors, convenes Congress for special sessions, etc.

As **chief executive officer**, that is, the head of the US government, the President is responsible for enforcing the laws of Congress and managing the day-to-day affairs of the country. In practice, the President

- governs the country with the help of 15 **executive department**s, which are led by secretaries. These **secretaries** (the equivalents of ministers in European countries) form the President's **Cabinet**, which the President usually consults before making important decisions. Contrary to the cabinets of European countries, however, the President is not obliged by law to hold regular Cabinet meetings or discuss any issues with his secretaries; he has the right to make all decisions on his own if he wishes (for more details, see below ch. 8.3, "Executive Departments").
- is the head of an enormous federal bureaucracy, which mostly developed during the 20th century. The White House Office includes hundreds of personal assistants and other staff members, officially led by the **Chief of Staff**. There is also a large number of **federal agencies**, which are legally below the level of executive

departments (therefore their **directors** are not members of the Cabinet), but they often play crucial roles in the federal government and employ millions of people nationwide (for more details, see below in ch. 8.3).

- is the **commander-in-chief of all the armed forces of the US**, and he also appoints all the generals of the armed forces, which consist of the **US Army**, the **US Navy**, the **US Marine** Corps, and the **US Air Force**.[84] While in most parliamentary systems the head of state is formally commander-in-chief but the actual command of the army belongs to the Prime Minister or the minister of defense, the President has the exclusive right to issue commands and orders to the US armed forces, especially during wartime. The highest-ranking military commanders are all subordinated to him, he makes all the crucial strategic decisions (even when he has no military experience at all, for example Abraham Lincoln during the Civil War), and he can replace any military leaders at any time if he wishes.

8.2. President and Congress

From the list above it seems that the President is a uniquely powerful figure among the political leaders of Western democracies. This is probably true in theory but not necessarily true in practice. Despite his wide range of authority, the President also faces strong limitations to his power, created by the principle of the **separation of powers** and the practical system of **checks and balances** in the Constitution.

In European parliamentary systems, the informal influence of Prime Ministers is much larger than their formal powers, since they are almost always the leader of the party or the coalition of parties that commands a majority in Parliament. The Prime Minister's Cabinet usually consists of ministers who are also Members of Parliament of the government party or coalition, just like the Prime Minister. As a result, they can reasonably expect MPs to support bills or other motions proposed by the government; ministers can personally guide their favored bills through the legislative process, at times they can even exercise pressure on the majority party to line up behind the government.

[84] It is a common mistake among foreigners to refer to the US armed forces as „the American army", as if the two terms were synonyms. The Army, however, is only one service branch of the US armed forces (essentially, it is the land force), so make sure you use the proper term. The Marines are a unique branch, which is capable of fighting on land but transported by ships to its destination; it used to be part of the Navy.

This way, a Prime Minister has the ability to carry out his political program and get the necessary bills passed by Parliament.

The relationship between the President and Congress is entirely different. Due to the separation of powers, **the President is elected independently from Congress**, and has no institutional connection to any of the two houses. The President has the right to propose bills to Congress, but cannot force Congress to pass them, just as Congress cannot force the President to approve bills passed by legislature. **Members of the President's Cabinet must not be members of Congress**, so the President has no direct representatives in Congress. This practical independence and equality between the legislative and the executive branches is a very serious limitation on the President's power as chief executive. It often happens that the President belongs to one party, while the other party has a majority in one or both houses of Congress, and if the majority is hostile to the President, he is practically unable to carry out any consistent political program. But even if the majority of Congress is from the same party as the President, there is no guarantee that they will unconditionally support his initiatives: he often has to try and persuade influential Congressmen informally to get their support for his purposes. **The legislative and the executive are carefully balanced against each other by the Constitution, and if they want to achieve anything, they are forced to cooperate as equals.**

A very radical and rarely used weapon of Congress against the President is **impeachment**. Impeachment is a legal procedure against the President which can be initiated if he is suspected to have committed something illegal. It is not a criminal trial in the normal sense, because it is not conducted by the judicial branch but by Congress: the House of Representatives has the exclusive right to initiate impeachment by majority vote, while the Senate has the exclusive right to hold impeachment hearings and ultimately, to convict or acquit the President. The impeachment procedure is presided by the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, while the whole of the Senate acts as a huge jury. In the end, **at least two-thirds of Senators must vote against the President to convict him**. Impeachment is the only legal way to remove an active President from office. Besides removal, there is no other penalty, but once the President has been removed, he can be brought to trial in a standard criminal court, because he is no longer protected by the immunity of his office.

In the history of the US, only three presidents have been impeached: Andrew Johnson in 1868, **Bill Clinton** in 1998, and **Donald Trump**, who has the dubious honor of being

subjected the process twice: in early 2020 and in 2021, the second time after he had already left office. None of these impeachment procedures ended in conviction, however, since party politics always played a strong role in them. President Johnson (a Democrat) was impeached by the Republican majority because he strongly opposed the Reconstruction[85] program of Congress, while President Clinton (also a Democrat) tried to hush up his extramarital affair with a young female assistant, and the Republican-dominated Congress impeached him for perjury (false testimony before court) to ruin him politically. Both presidents were acquitted, because there was no two-thirds majority in the Senate to convict them (although in case of Johnson only one vote was missing).

Donald Trump, President between 2017–2021[86]

President Trump (a Republican) was first impeached in early 2020 because he pressured the President of Ukraine to collect incriminating evidence against the son of the Democratic presidential candidate, Joe Biden, but the Republican majority of the Senate acquitted him. Perhaps the strongest case of all four was Trump's second impeachment, which was initiated after he refused to accept the outcome of the 2020 presidential election (which was won by Biden) and urged his followers in a public rally to pressure Congress against certifying the results. Soon after, Trump supporters stormed the Capitol building on January 6, 2021, and overpowered the Capitol police, forcing Representatives and Senators to flee from the chambers of Congress. This was an unprecedented violent riot against the federal legislature, and Trump's role as instigator was beyond doubt; yet the majority of Republican Senators

[85] *Reconstruction* (1865–1877): Name of the period following the Civil War, during which the federal government was trying to reform the former Confederate states in order to assist the social integration of former slaves and to remove former rebel leaders from politics. The Reconstruction was mostly supported by the Republican Party which had a majority in Congress, but it was opposed by the Democrats who had an overwhelming support in the South, therefore well-meaning federal laws were often disregarded or even deliberately broken by white Southern leaders. Despite certain achievements (e.g. the 14th and 15th Amendments guaranteeing the civil rights of all Americans), the Reconstruction is mostly considered a failure by historians, since blacks remained a suppressed and segregated minority in the South.

[86] Source of photo: https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/

decided to vote against conviction (some of them arguing that Trump had already been voted out of office therefore impeachment makes no sense), so he escaped both procedures.

Contrary to popular belief, President **Richard Nixon** was not impeached in 1974 after the **Watergate scandal**:[87] he resigned from office before impeachment could have been initiated against him – the only American President ever to do so.

8.3. The Executive Departments

The **executive department**s are the American equivalents of ministries in European governments. Each department is headed by a **Secretary**, who is chosen and appointed by the President. Since 2002, there are fifteen executive departments, whose Secretaries constitute the President's Cabinet. The oldest and most important departments are the following:

- **The Department of State** (https://www.state.gov/), also called State Department), headed by the **Secretary of State**. Although its name does not reveal it, it is responsible primarily for foreign policy and the diplomatic relations of the US with other countries, so it is the equivalent of the British Foreign Office, or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Hungary.

- The **Department of the Treasury** (https://home.treasury.gov/), headed by the **Secretary of the Treasury**. It is the equivalent of the Exchequer in Britain, or the Finance Ministry in Hungary. It is responsible for the financial affairs of the federal government, including the **federal budget**, the **national debt**, the collection of taxes and duties. It also supervises banks and financial institutions

[87] *Watergate scandal* (1972–74): The most famous political scandal in American history, which led to the resignation of Richard Nixon from the presidency in 1974. It all started with a burglary in an office building in Washington D.C. called Watergate Building in 1972, in which the headquarters of the Democratic Party were also located, hence the name of the entire affair. After Republican Richard Nixon won the 1972 presidential election, two journalists of *The Washington Post* were tipped off by an unknown informant that the burglary was part of a large-scale illegal operation by Nixon's operatives to spy on his opposition, and Nixon ordered the FBI not to investigate the case. The revelations of the newspaper brought Nixon into an increasingly difficult position, but he fought hard for his political survival. Eventually even his own party turned against him and supported impeaching the president, therefore Nixon resigned in 1974 to avoid further humiliation. He was succeeded by his Vice President, Gerald Ford, who pardoned him for his illegal actions, therefore he never had to face a proper court trial.

nationwide, and advises the government on general economic policy. Besides these responsibilities, it performs some of the functions of a national bank in Europe, for example it oversees the issue of coins and paper money. Perhaps the most respected and feared bureau of the Treasury is the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), responsible for collecting all sorts of taxes, and also investigating **tax evasion** (the equivalent of the APEH in Hungary).

- The **Department of Defense** (https://www.defense.gov/, also called Defense Department), headed by the **Secretary of Defense**. As the name suggests, it is responsible for overseeing the US armed forces and conduct military operations. The headquarters of the Defense Department is the famous **Pentagon** building in Washington D.C. The highest ranking military officer overseeing all strategic military planning and operations is the **Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff**. He is directly responsible to the Defense Secretary and to the President.

- The **Department of Justice** (https://www.justice.gov/, also called Justice Department), headed by the **Attorney General**. It is responsible for representing the federal government in legal suits and cases, prosecuting federal crimes, and advising the President on legal issues. The Department supervises all federal **law enforcement agencies**, including the famous FBI.

These four departments or their predecessors have existed since 1789, so they constitute the core of the executive branch. The other departments are more recent (mostly 20th century creations), and they mostly deal with less crucial issues and therefore their leaders are less influential and not widely known politicians. Also, their authority overlaps with those of the state governments, so they often have limited influence over the day-to-day operation of their area. Perhaps the most powerful of these is the most recent department, the **Department of Homeland Security** (https://www.dhs.gov/), created in 2002 after the **terror attacks on September 11, 2001** to oversee and coordinate all federal government efforts against terrorist activities on American soil. The Department received a wide range of powers and functions. It took over from the State Department the **naturalization** (granting of US citizenship) of foreigners and the issue of **green card**s (permanent residency permits). It supervises all bureaus and agencies responsible for customs and border control as well as guarding the coasts of the country. It enforces immigration laws by prosecuting and expelling **illegal immigrants**. It is also responsible for organizing government response to major emergencies like natural disasters.

Besides the executive departments, there is a large number of federal agencies, which are one step below in the organizational hierarchy, but in fact some of them are more influential than many of the departments. Some of the most important and most widely known are:

- **Federal Reserve System** (https://www.federalreserve.gov/, also called **Fed**): The organization responsible for the monetary policies of the US, for example the inflation rate and the interest rate of the US dollar. It is independent from the federal government, overseen by its own Board of Directors appointed by the President. It is roughly the equivalent of a central or national bank of European countries, although it shares some of these functions with the Treasury.

- **Federal Bureau of Investigation** (**FBI**; https://www.fbi.gov/): Federal law enforcement organization, which investigates federal crimes (crimes that do not belong under any particular state's criminal justice system). People working for the FBI are not called 'police officers' but 'federal agents'.

- **Central Intelligence Agency** (**CIA**; https://www.cia.gov/): The organization responsible for collecting and analyzing information about other countries, especially from the point of view of US national security.

- **National Aeronautics and Space Administration** (**NASA**; https://www.nasa.gov/): The organization overseeing US space research programs.

Besides these high-profile organizations, there are many other agencies which are less well-known but their work is crucial, such as the Environmental Protection Agency, the Federal Communications Commission, the Commission on Civil Rights, and many others.

8.4. The Election of the President

The Constitution created a strange system for electing the President of the US. While most Americans believe that the "President is elected by the people", in fact that is not what the text of the Constitution prescribes: he is not elected directly by the people, but by a select group of people, the so-called **electors**. The Founding Fathers probably invented the

electoral college (the widespread name for the collective body of electors) because they did not entirely trust the people to make a wise choice in such an important question. **The electors are appointed by the states and each state may appoint as many electors as the number of Congressmen (representative + senators) they have.** In theory, the electors of a certain state could vote any way they want: the Constitution at least did not lay down any rules about what should guide their decision. In practice, however, **electors are required by state laws to vote according to which candidate has received the majority of the popular votes in their state**. So, in practice the voters of each state decide which candidate should be supported by their state's electors. But because the president is ultimately elected by 50 different statewide elections (all held on the same day), not by one single national election, and the rules of how each state converts popular votes (the votes of the actual citizens) to electoral votes are pretty strange, the presidential election in the US may result in surprising outcomes, for instance the candidate who has received more popular votes nationwide may still lose in the electoral college (this happened in 2000 and in 2016 as well!). (For details, see ch. 9.7, "Presidential elections")

The original Constitution did not limit the number of times a President can be re-elected. The first President of the US, **George Washington** (1789–1797), however, decided to step down when his second **term in office** ended, and he created a strong precedent: it became a tradition that all later Presidents retired once they had spent eight years in office. The only President who broke this tradition was **Franklin D. Roosevelt** (1933–1945), who decided to run for a third time in 1940, arguing that the dangerous international situation (World War II had already broken out in Europe) required a strong and experienced national leader. He was re-elected once more, in 1944, but died the next year. In order to prevent such an event in the future, the 22nd Amendment was ratified in 1951, and since then, nobody can be elected President more than twice.

The Constitution sets only two requirements against presidential candidates: that they must be older than 35 years and they must be "natural-born citizens" of the USA, which was obviously meant to exclude immigrants from becoming the nation's leader. If we look at American history, however, we can see that the overwhelming majority of the former presidents have certain similarities in their personal background. So far, all former Presidents have been white males except for **Barack Obama**, the only black president, and all of them belonged to one of the many Protestant denominations except for **John F. Kennedy** (1961–63) and Joe Biden, the only Catholic Presidents in American history.

So far, no woman has ever been elected President, although Hillary Clinton ran for the presidency in 2016 but lost to Donald Trump. Joe Biden chose the first female and the first non-white Vice President in 2020 when she picked Kamala Harris as his running mate.

Most Presidents had been prominent politicians – Vice Presidents, Senators, or state governors – before they won the presidency. For example, Bill Clinton (1993–2001) and George W. Bush (2001–2009) had been had formerly been governors of Arkansas and Texas, respectively. Barack Obama (2009–2017) was Senator of Illinois before winning in 2008. The typical exceptions to this rule are former generals or military heroes, who have a good chance of being elected, for instance George Washington led the American revolutionary army during the War of Independence; Ulysses Grant (1869–1877) had become famous as the commander of the Northern troops during the Civil War; or Dwight D. Eisenhower (1953–1961), who had been the Supreme Commander of the Allied troops in Europe during World War II. The only person ever elected to president without any experience in politics or the military was Donald Trump, a multi-millionaire who spent his entire life in the real estate business but became a national celebrity as a reality show host in the 2000s, which most probably helped him a lot during his campaign.

8.5. Key terms and concepts

Act of Congress
armed forces (of the US)
Attorney General
bill (of Congress)
Cabinet
Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff
checks and balances
chief executive officer
Chief of Staff
CIA
Clinton, Bill
commander-in-chief
Congressman / -woman
convict / acquit
Department / Secretary of Defense
Department / Secretary of Homeland Security
Department / Secretary of the Treasury
Department of Justice
director (of federal agency)
elector / electoral college
executive branch of power
executive department
FBI
Fed (Federal Reserve)
federal agency

federal budget
federal official
green card
head of state
illegal immigrant / immigration
impeachment
Kennedy, John F.
law enforcement agency
NASA
national debt
naturalization
Nixon, Richard
Obama, Barack
override the veto
Pentagon
Roosevelt, Franklin D.
Secretary of State
separation of powers
State Department / Department of State
tax evasion
term (in office)
Trump, Donald
US Air Force
US Army
US Marines
US Navy
veto
Vice President
Washington, George
Watergate scandal
White House

9. American Political System Part III: Elections

9.1. Federal Elections in the US

Although the Constitution, as its preamble boldly stated, was written in the name of „We the People of the United States", the Founding Fathers did not give the citizens of the country full democratic control over the federal government. In the original Constitution, only the lower house of Congress was elected by the people; the selection of Senators as well as the electors responsible for electing the President was the task of the state legislatures. It was also left to the states to decide who has the right to vote for representatives of the House, and they were not elected by all the adult population of each district: each state had laws that restricted the **franchise** (the right to vote) to property-owning or taxpaying adult males. All women as well as all black males were excluded from the franchise, even in those states where slavery did not exist.

The democratic principle – the idea that all adults should have the right to participate in elections – gradually gained ground during the 19th century. By the mid-19th century, property qualifications were gradually abolished in all states, so all white male adults received the franchise. After the Civil War, the **15th Amendment** was added to the Constitution in 1870, which was meant to guarantee the rights of former slaves to vote (it is another matter that most blacks remained disenfranchised in the Southern states until the **civil rights movement** of the 1950s and 60s). The **19th Amendment** in 1920 gave the franchise to all adult women. Finally, the 26th Amendment in 1971 lowered the minimum **voting age** from 21 to 18.[88]

These constitutional amendments and other federal laws have created a legal framework for **federal elections** which all states are bound by, but within these broad boundaries each state is free to set its own election laws as long as they do not contradict the Constitution or existing federal laws. As a result, **the rules of federal elections are not uniform all over the country**. For example, some states do not allow **felons** (people convicted for a major crime) to vote, while others do. Unlike in Hungary, there is no federal or central database of voters, where their addresses are stored and regularly

[88] As a result, young Americans between 18 and 21 today may vote or may join the armed forces (and may die as a result) but may not legally buy and drink alcohol in most states, since that right is governed by state laws, and 21 years is still the "drinking age" in most states.

updated: people who wish to vote at an election are required to **register** first in their home state by identifying themselves and giving their current address. Since **registration is not compulsory**, a significant number of people never bother to register themselves, and as a result, they never vote. It is also possible that people forget to register in time and when they want to vote on the day of the election, they can no longer do so. Non-registration is especially common among poor and uneducated people and ethnic minorities. Before the 1970s, registration was also an effective way to exclude blacks from elections in the southern states, because the authorities refused to register them on various legal excuses.

Various states also have different methods for voting and counting the votes. In Hungary and most European countries, voting is typically done with a pen on a paper ballot: the **ballot** contains the names of all the candidates for the office, and the voter puts a cross into a box next to the candidate's name. Then votes are counted by hand. In the US, however, voting is usually done by special **voting machines**, which make counting faster and easier. In the 1960s, the punch card system was introduced: voters were given a standard-sized punch card and a punch device, and they punched a hole next to the name of the candidate they preferred. The votes on the punch cards were then counted by special machines. After the controversial 2000 presidential election, which revealed various problems with punch card votes in Florida, these systems were gradually eliminated. Nowadays, most states use computerized electronic voting, where voters make their choice on a touchscreen or by pushing buttons on a keyboard, and votes are added up by the computer. Electronic voting machines also became controversial after the 2016 election, when it turned out that Russian hackers made attempts to hack into state networks to manipulate results, and also in 2020, when Donald Trump and his supporters accused Democrats of a large-scale manipulation of the voting machines (as well as the entire election). State authorities in both cases maintained that the results were accurate, but many voters distrust computers because they consider them easy to be manipulated, while recounting the votes in case the outcome is disputed is problematic if there is no "paper trail" (a printed tabulation of the data).

In 1845, Congress set the date of Congressional and Presidential elections on **the Tuesday following the first Monday of November in even-numbered years**, called simply **Election Day** in the US. Since then, all federal elections (the election of Representatives every two years, the election of Senators every six years, and the presidential election every four years) take place on the first Tuesday between the 2nd and

8th of November. Many states, although not all of them, hold several of their elections (e.g., election of the state governor or members of the state legislature) also on this day, to make use of the high voter turnout, since federal elections (especially presidential elections) normally attract a lot more people to the polls than state elections. Americans vote at so-called **polling stations**, which are temporary facilities set up in public buildings like state government offices or public schools.

Each state is free to decide what kind of identification is required of voters: since there is no nationwide or even statewide ID cards issued to everybody in the US, a variety of **photo IDs** are accepted, like driver's licenses, company-issued IDs, credit cards with a picture, or student IDs. Some states even accept IDs without a photo, for example Social Security Cards (which are essentially the same as Hungarian "TAJ-kártya" and only contain a name and a number), but this has recently become a controversial practice as some people, especially Republicans, claim that such practices make it easier for noncitizens to vote and provide opportunity for cheating. Others, especially Democrats, argue that some people, especially poor and elderly citizens, may not have any picture ID at all, therefore requiring one excludes them from participating in the election, and that there is no evidence for large-scale cheating at federal elections.

9.2. Primaries

In the US, basically anybody who may vote may also be a **candidate** for any political office, including **congressional seat**s. They do not need to collect nominations from voters like in Hungary, or deposit a certain amount of money, as in Britain: all they need to do is announce their intention and register their name with the authority that organizes the election. In most cases, however, **only the candidates of the two largest parties have a real chance to win a seat in either house of Congress**. It is a very important aspect of American democracy that the candidates of the two parties are not appointed by state or national party leaders, but they are also chosen by the voters. The system of selecting the most popular party candidate is called **primary election** in the US.

Primary elections were first introduced in the early 20th century to put an end to the corrupt practice of party bosses choosing their loyal followers to run for offices. **The**

purpose of a primary is to decide which candidate of a certain party should be nominated for a certain office. It is basically a small "test election" within each party. Both Republicans and Democrats routinely hold primaries to select the most popular candidate to run for mayor of a major city, governor of a state, representative in the House, or US Senator.

There are different kinds of primary elections. At a **closed primary**, only those people may vote on a certain party's candidates who have registered themselves as party supporters. This kind of primary can be seen as an opinion poll among party supporters. At an **open primary**, however, any local resident may vote for either party's candidates (though not for both at the same time), regardless of their party affiliation. An open primary tries to find out which party candidate is the most popular among the general population, rather than merely among party supporters. The winners of the two parties' primaries then try to defeat each other in early November. Primary elections are the most complicated during presidential campaigns, because the president is the only office-holder elected nationwide, therefore both parties in all 50 states must hold primaries or **caucus**es[89] to determine which presidential candidate is the most popular in that state (see "Presidential elections" for details).

9.3. The winner-take-all rule

Most elections in the US are decided on the basis of the **winner-take-all rule**, which simply means that the candidate with the most votes wins. In other words, there is no requirement to achieve an **absolute majority** (50% + 1 vote), it is enough to have a **plurality** of the votes (to receive more votes than any of the other candidates). The difference matters if there are more than two candidates: out of two competitors, one always gets an absolute majority, but if there are three, four, five or more people competing for an elected position, a plurality of significantly less than 50% of all votes may be enough to win.

[89] *caucus*: an older and less widespread way of selecting the most popular candidate from several ones. At a caucus, people vote publicly, not by secret ballot, as in primaries, and the least popular candidate is eliminated before the next round. So people cast multiple votes and they have a chance to change their mind if their first choice is out of the competition. Caucuses may take a long time, and therefore they are less popular than primaries, favored by the older generations.

The system has one big advantage: it is simple and easy to understand for everybody. Under the winner-take-all system, there is no need for a runoff election (a second round), because somebody always ends up as winner (except when two winners receive exactly the same number of votes, but that is very unlikely). Its disadvantage is, however, that it allows somebody to win who does not enjoy the support of the majority of voters. The winner-take-all rule may produce especially strange results at presidential elections, because under certain circumstances it allows the candidate who has received less votes nationwide to win the election and become president (see the ch. 9.7, "Presidential elections" below).

9.4. Congressional elections

Members of the **House of Representatives** are elected **every second year**. **Representative**s may be re-elected as many times as they wish. There are **435 seats in the House**, which are apportioned (distributed) among the 50 states in proportion to their population and re-apportioned every 10 years after a new national census (for details, see ch. 7.2, "US Congress"). The Constitution prescribes, however, that **each state must have at least one representative in Congress**, regardless of how small their population is. Federal laws also require that the states divide their territory into **congressional district**s of equal population, and each district should elect one representative into the House. Each state legislature is free, however, to draw the boundaries of its districts any way they wish, which gives opportunity for political manipulation. The party which has a majority in the state legislature usually tries to draw the boundaries in such a way as to include a majority preferring their party in as many districts as possible (for example, Republicans carve up large cities into several districts and add extensive rural territories, since big city populations tend to prefer Democrats; Democrats, on the other hand, create districts in which city dwellers are in majority). This manipulation is called **gerrymandering**[90] in American English.

[90] *gerrymandering*: The term originates from 1812, when governor of Massachusetts Elbridge Gerry signed a bill that drew a very strangely shaped electoral district around Boston, which local journalists compared to a salamander, hence the name of the practice. It is always a politically motivated manipulation of electoral districts with the intention to benefit one political party over the other. For more explanation on gerrymandering, see this page: https://gerrymander.princeton.edu/info/

Senators are elected for six-year terms, and they may also be re-elected as many times as they wish. **Each state**, regardless of its size or population, **has two senators**, who are never re-elected at the same time. Every second year, about one-third of the 100 senators are re-elected on Election Day (this system is called a "staggered" election in American English). Each senator is elected by all the voters of the state, there are no districts for senators. The senator who is in office for the longer time is called the "senior senator" of the state, whereas the other is the "junior senator", regardless of which person is actually older or younger than the other.

Under the two-party system, the typical choreography of congressional elections is the following: there is an **incumbent**, a person currently in office who enjoys the support of one party. This person is challenged by the candidate of the other party who would like to defeat them. So one candidate is fighting to keep their seat in Congress, while the other is struggling to take it away from them. The only exception to this rule is when the incumbent dies or decides to retire, and both parties need to find a new candidate for the position.

9.5. Presidential campaigns: the primaries

The longest, hardest, and most complicated **election campaign** precedes the election of the President. Since the President is the only federal official elected by the entire nation, the selection of the most suitable candidate takes a long time. More than a year before Election Day, the summer or fall of the previous year, several people in both parties announce their intention to „run for president", as people on the street say.

There are two typical situations, depending on whether the current President is finishing his first or his second **term in office**. If they have been in office only for one term, they are most likely to run again,[91] and in this case they are usually not challenged by anybody else from their party, and a sitting President faces the candidate of the opposing party who emerged victorious from the long primary campaign. This was the situation for instance in 2020, when Republican President Donald Trump battled with the winner of the Democratic primaries, Joe Biden. The occupant of the White House has several

[91] The last President who could have run for a second full term and decided not to do so was Lyndon B. Johnson in 1968, because his popularity hit rock bottom due to the unsuccessful Vietnam War.

advantages over his challenger, therefore the sitting President has a strong chance of winning reelection for a second term.[92] If the President is finishing his second and last term, however, the race is open for candidates in both parties: such a situation occurred in 2000, when Bill Clinton finished his second term, or in 2008 or 2016, when George W. Bush or Barack Obama stepped down after eight years in office. In such election years, both parties have a lot of hopefuls who try to win the nomination to be their party's candidate.

After a candidate has announced his wish to become President, he or she first needs to collect a huge amount of money, usually millions of dollars, because the campaign is extremely costly. Each of the presidential candidates need dozens of **campaign manager**s, **adviser**s, **aide**s, assistants, and a nationwide network of – partly voluntary – activists to have a chance for success. Most of the money, however, is spent on **political advertisement**. In the US, there are no legal limits on political ads in the public media, and prices are very high, especially as presidential candidates need to reach a nationwide audience. Donations may come from individuals or organizations, but the maximum amount is limited by law to prevent candidates from becoming too indebted to any one supporter. There are various loopholes, however, which make it possible for candidates to collect more money than the laws allow, for example by relying on **PACs** (political action committees). These organizations are formally independent of any candidate, but they also collect donations (sometimes millions of dollars) and campaign for the person or attack their opponents. Such semi-legal campaign resources are called '**soft money**' in American political slang, and they often amount to many millions of dollars.

In the 2000s, when the internet became available to practically everyone, and smartphones made social media extremely popular, a new channel of political campaigning opened up: the **online campaign**. Barack Obama was the first presidential candidate who utilized Twitter, Facebook, and other online resources very effectively during his 2008 campaign, but the Donald Trump opened a new era in media-driven campaigning in 2016 with his incessant tweeting, which generated huge waves on social media not just during the campaign, but throughout the four years of his presidency.

[92] In the past 50 years, three presidents lost their reelection bid: Jimmy Carter in 1980, George H. W. Bush in 1992, and Donald Trump in 2016. On the other hand, Richard Nixon (1968–1974), Ronald Reagan (1981–1989), Bill Clinton (1993–2001), George W. Bush (2001–2009) and Barack Obama (2009–2017) all won two elections (although Nixon did not finish his second term due to the Watergate scandal).

The official part of the campaign really begins in January of the election year, when the so-called **primary season** starts: this is the period of time during which both parties hold their presidential primaries in all the states. During this period (usually between late January and early June), the number of presidential candidates in each party is reduced from as many as ten or more to ultimately one. The long series of primary elections have one purpose: **to select the most popular candidate in both parties**. If a current President runs again, his party usually does not hold primaries at all, or even if it does, it is only a formality. But when the incumbent President retires, both parties need a full series of primary elections to select the party's candidate.

At presidential primaries, voters formally elect **delegate**s to the party's nominating convention, so they do not directly vote for candidates. Nonetheless, each state's delegates are bound to represent the preference of voters expressed at the primary. Apart from this general rule, there is a lot of variety from state to state. As it was mentioned in subchapter 9.2, some states prefer the system of caucuses instead of primaries. Each state has its own primary rules: how to vote (see open and closed primaries in ch. 9.2), how to distribute delegates among candidates (interestingly, the winner-take-all principle is not applied at primaries, so candidates finishing second or third at a state primary also gain some delegates) etc. The national party headquarters have the final say over each party's primary calendar, but they have to come to an agreement with state party organizations.

The two earliest presidential campaign events are traditionally the first **caucus in Iowa**, followed by the **first primary is New Hampshire** in late January or early February, under a lot of national media attention. Recently, several other states choose to hold their primaries on the same day in March, creating so-called 'Super Tuesdays' and other major primary events in hope of attracting more media interest. Primaries continue until early summer, but the later primaries do not generate much attention, because in most cases, the probable winner emerges by March the latest. If there is a clear favorite among the candidates, and he or she keeps winning more and more primaries, the rivals gradually realize that they have no chance to defeat the '**front-runner**' at the convention, and one by one, they decide to give up the race.[93] Despite the disappearance of the rivals, however,

[93] A rare exception to this rule was provided by the Democratic primary of 2008: Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama were both strong and popular candidates with a lot of money at their disposal, so they battled as long as early June until Obama finally emerged as the winner and the official presidential candidate of the Democratic Party. He later invited Hillary to be a member of his first Cabinet.

the winner of the primary season becomes the party's official candidate only when he is formally announced at the party convention.

9.6. Presidential campaigns: the conventions

Both parties' **nominating convention**s are usually held in late summer, typically in late August. Conventions are the closest equivalent to the party congresses of European parties, because this is the only occasion that the two big parties have a national gathering, but **they take place only once every four years**. Their most important task is to officially choose and nominate the party's presidential candidate. In the past, the nomination was often decided only at the convention itself with the delegates voting for their favorite, but no party convention had more than one standing candidate since 1976.[94] The other important event of the convention is that the candidate announces his choice for Vice President. The party's **vice-presidential candidate** is always picked by the presidential candidate out of the party's politicians. Very often, he or she invites one of his rivals from the primary season, who lost against him or her in the nomination race, to be the candidate's **running mate**, as the Americans informally refer to aspiring vice-presidential candidates. The two candidates form the so-called **presidential ticket**: voters are two choose between two pairs of candidates on Election Day.

Vice-presidential candidates are usually selected in such a way as to bring more votes for the ticket: if the presidential candidate is from the East Coast, he may pick someone from the South or the West; if the candidate is relatively old, he or she may choose a younger person; and so on. A good example is provided by Barack Obama in 2008, who was a young and relatively inexperienced black candidate, so he chose Joe Biden, an older white politician who was a veteran Senator. Joe Biden, in his turn, picked Kamala Harris in 2020, a middle-aged woman of color to compensate for his age and gender. Afterwards, the two candidates continue the campaign together, and the vice-presidential nominee also works hard for the success of the ticket.

Besides these two important announcements, **conventions are** typically **spectacular media events**, where all the leading figures of the party make speeches, pledge their

[94] In that year, incumbent president Gerald Ford managed to defeat his party challenger, Ronald Reagan, only at the Republican convention.

support for the party's candidate, and encourage voters to do the same. Well-known entertainers (singers, musicians, actors etc.) and other national celebrities also appear regularly. Members of the audience are waving signs with the candidates' names (e.g. "Biden & Harris 2020"), they applaud and cheer a lot, so the whole thing is essentially a national political show to attract more voters to the party's candidates.

After the conventions, the last and most important period of the campaign begins in early September, when there are only two candidates (and two vice-presidential candidates) left standing, one for each party, and both parties unite in their effort to secure the presidency for them. In this period, the candidates continue to tour the whole country, attending public **rallies**, giving countless speeches and interviews. Since the 1970s, the candidates have always had **televised debates**, which are considered crucial for the outcome of the election. The rules and conditions are carefully set before the event begins: both candidates must receive the same amount of time to talk, the moderator must be perfectly neutral, the audience (if there is any) is forbidden to clap or express preference for any candidate. Since there are a significant number of voters who do not make up their mind until the last weeks of the long campaign, the good or bad appearance made by one or the other candidate at the televised debates may determine the outcome of the whole election.

9.7. Presidential Elections

The Founding Fathers worked out an indirect method for the election of the President. According to the Constitution, each state should select **as many electors as the number of Congressmen (Representatives + Senators) they have in the federal Congress** (but electors must not be identical with the state's Congressmen; they must not be employed by the federal government at all). These electors gather in each state capital and vote for president and vice president (in mid-December of the election year), and their votes are sent to Washington D.C., where a special session of Congress gathers in early January of the following year to certify the electoral votes. The Constitution assigns the duty to the Vice President (who may actually be a presidential candidate) in his or her capacity as the chair of the Senate to open each state's electoral vote and announce the results. **The person who receives an absolute majority (that is, at least 50% +1 vote) of all the electoral votes becomes President**. In

case nobody receives an absolute majority, the House of Representatives can elect the President out of the three best candidates in such a way that each state has one vote in the House.[95] Today, since there are 435 members of the House and 100 members of the Senate, plus Washington D.C. (which does not belong to any state) is also given 3 electors since 1961, **there are altogether 538 electoral votes, and at least 270 votes are needed for any candidate to be elected President**.

The Constitution remains silent on whether the electors of each state should be elected by the people or not. The Founding Fathers apparently thought that this issue should be left to the states to decide. At the earliest presidential elections, several of the states held a popular election and gave their electors a mandate to follow the popular will; while in several other states, the legislatures selected their electors and told them who to vote for. Popular elections only became the standard practice from the 1830s, but South Carolina continued the practice of the legislative selection of electors until the outbreak of the Civil War.

Today, electoral votes are always determined by the popular vote. In 48 states and D.C., they use the **winner-take-all rule**: **whichever candidate receives a plurality of the vote gets all the electoral votes of that state**. Only two relatively small states (Maine and Nebraska) use a different method which makes it possible to split the state's electors between several candidates.[96]

The most curious feature of the electoral system combined with the winner-take-all principle of determining the electoral votes is the way it distorts the result of the popular vote: **the candidate who gains the smallest possible advantage over his rival(s) in any state wins all the electors of that state**. In case of a close state election with three candidates, for example, one may win all the electors of a state with only about 40% of all the votes, gaining 100% of electoral votes. This means that the votes cast for the losing candidate in any particular state are wasted, they simply do not count at all, do not

[95] There were only three instances in American history when the House of Representatives had to elect the next president: in 1800, 1824, and in 1876. Since then, for almost 150 years, somebody always gained an absolute majority in the Electoral College, typically because there are only major party candidates with strong nationwide support and because most states use the winner-take-all method to assign electoral votes (see more below).

[96] In these two states, they count the popular votes by congressional districts, so different candidates may win in different districts, while the two electors who represent the state's senators vote for the candidate who received more votes in the whole state. This is a much fairer system, which gives a chance for the less popular candidate to pick up electoral votes, and it represents the popular opinion of a state much more closely than the winner-take-all system, which gives all the electoral votes of a state to one single candidate, significantly distorting the popular will (see more below).

influence the outcome of the election. The biggest defect of the winner-take-all system of awarding electors to candidates is that **it may produce a situation where one candidate receives more popular votes nationwide than the other, but the other one still wins in the electoral college**. This is not merely a theoretical possibility: it happened in 2000 and in 2016 as well. The crucial question of American presidential elections is who wins in a handful of densely populated states (California, Texas, New York, Florida, Illinois, Pennsylvania, Ohio etc.) where an advantage of a few thousand votes may bring dozens of electors.

9.8. The Presidential Election of 2016: a case study

The most recent election which renewed the national debate about the electoral college took place in November 2016. The Democratic Party's presidential candidate was (for the first time in American history) a woman, Hillary Clinton, wife of former president Bill Clinton. She faced an unusual Republican candidate: for the first time, a major American party nominated a multi-millionaire businessman and television celebrity, Donald Trump, instead of a professional politician or a military general.

The prevalent opinion of most **political analyst**s and pundits was that Trump stands little chance against Clinton: his brash style, his extravagant promises, his controversial and provocative statements alienated many voters, and his lack of political experience was also supposed to work against him. However, Clinton was also not a particularly popular candidate: she was seen by many as distant and arrogant, an overly ambitious former **first lady**, and his husband's political career had its share of public scandals and allegations, which did not cast a positive light on Hillary.

Hillary Rodham Clinton as Secretary of State in Barack Obama's administration (2009–2017)[97]

Nonetheless, Hillary Clinton was clearly favored by the majority of Americans: she received 65.8 million votes nationwide, whereas Donald Trump got less than 63 million. This nearly 3 million gap would normally be enough for any candidate to win the presidential election.

However, Clinton's votes were distributed very unevenly in the country: she was heavily supported in such large and strongly Democratic states California or New York, where she received 6 million more votes than Donald Trump. But voting margins do not matter in the Electoral College: she naturally received all the electoral votes of these two states, but the extra votes did not earn her extra electors.

On the other hand, Trump in his campaign heavily courted the white working-class voters of the Midwest: he promised to bring back those industrial jobs that had been moved abroad (mostly to Mexico or China) to benefit from lower industrial wages there. As a result, Trump scored very narrow surprise victories in several traditionally Democrat-leaning states in which Hillary did not campaign much, considering them securely on her side. He won Pennsylvania by 44,000 votes, Wisconsin by 22,000, and Michigan by hardly more than 10,000 votes! Altogether, these 76,000 extra votes won him three states and 46 electoral votes – more than enough to secure a comfortable victory in the Electoral College.

In the end, Trump received 304 electoral votes against Clinton's 227. If you consider only the result of the Electoral College, Trump won a confident victory. If you look at the electoral map (for instance here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2016_United_States_presidential_election), you can see that Trump won far more states than Hillary did. But neither the Electoral College result nor the electoral map reveal the fact that significantly more Americans voted for Hillary Clinton than for Donald Trump. And if the majority of American states awarded their

[97] Source of photo: https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/ei/pix/115472.htm

electors in a more proportionate way (e.g. by allocating some electors to the minority candidates in each state), Trump would have never become president.

The 2016 election once again provoked a debate about whether the Electoral College is an outdated system for electing the President of the United States. Conservatives (who tend to be Republican sympathizers) argue that the Electoral College is useful because it gives relatively more weight to rural states (they get more electors than their share of the national population would justify) and does not allow a handful of large states to decide the outcome of the presidential election. Progressive reformists (who tend to be Democrats and the losers of the current system) emphasize that the Electoral College is ultimately undemocratic, since it may go against the will of the majority of Americans. Both sides seem to ignore the fact that the winner-take-all system (which causes the discrepancy between the popular vote and the electoral college result) is actually not a requirement of the Constitution, so any of the states could decide to change the way they convert the outcome of popular voting to electoral votes. Most states do not choose to do so probably because a proportionate system would reduce their relative weight in the Electoral College: they would not "tip the scales" if they assign almost half of their electors to one candidate and the other half to the other one.

There is one ultimate argument behind the current system: it almost always produces a clear winner in the Electoral College with an absolute majority of electoral votes. Without the winner-take-all system, third-party candidates would also have a shot at winning a few electors,[98] which may result in nobody getting more than 50% and therefore the House of Representatives would have to elect the next President, which most Americans consider to be a worse (and even less democratic) option than the current one.

9.9. The inauguration

The marathon run of the American presidential election ends on January 20 of the following year: since 1936, this is the official day of the **inauguration** of the president, which means that this is the day on which the new president takes the **oath of office** before the Chief Justice of the United States. The ceremony takes place outdoors, on the

[98] The last time a third-party candidate won any electors happened in 1968, when George Wallace, Democratic governor of Alabama, ran as an independent campaigning for the maintenance of racial segregation in the South. He won 45 electoral votes in four states of the Deep South with his program.

western front of the US Capitol, and it attracts hundreds of thousands of visitors. Before the new president is sworn in, there are various performances: poems are recited or songs are sung, military bands play music, senior politicians make short introductory speeches, and a minister or other religious figure offers a benediction. Before the president, the new vice president also takes the oath of office. The text of the presidential oath is specified by the Constitution: "I [XY] do solemnly swear that I faithfully execute the office of President of the United States, and will to the best of my ability, preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States." According to tradition, each president since George Washington has added the phrase "so help me God", but it is not part of the official text. The oath is taken on the Bible, which is held by the President's spouse. If the new President were an atheist, he or she could substitute the word "swear" with "affirm", but so far, all Presidents have professed a faith in God and used the Bible during the ceremony.

After the oath comes the other major event of the ceremony: the **inaugural address**. This is a long speech in which the new president usually recognizes the historical significance of the peaceful transition of power, then focuses on his plans and ambitions for the next term. Inaugural addresses are usually solemn and formal speeches, with a lot of historical references and celebrations of the nation's constitutional tradition and American values like freedom and democracy. The new president also routinely recognizes the problems and difficulties faced by the country but promises new solutions and initiatives to make things better. After the speech is over, the new president is celebrated by the special 21-gun salute reserved for the nation's leader.

9.10. Useful links

For more information about US Congressional and presidential elections, visit the following sites:

https://www.usa.gov/voting

https://www.usa.gov/election

https://www.270towin.com/

9.11. Key terms and concepts

15th Amendment
19th Amendment
aide
ballot
campaign manager / adviser
candidate
caucus
civil rights movement
closed / open primary
congressional district
congressional seat
delegate
election campaign
Election Day
elector
federal elections
felon / felony
first lady
franchise
front-runner
gerrymandering
House of Representatives
inaugural address
inauguration
incumbent
Iowa caucus
New Hampshire primary
nominating convention
oath of office
online campaign
PAC (political action committee)
photo ID
plurality
political analyst
polling station
presidential candidate
presidential ticket
primary election
primary season
rally
register / registration
Representative
running mate
Senate / Senator
soft money
televised debate
term (in office)
vice presidential candidate
voting age
voting machine
winner-take-all

10. American Political System Part IV: Political Parties

10.1. The American two-party system

The Constitution does not contain a single reference to political parties. This is not by accident: the Founding Fathers were convinced that 'factions' (as political groups were called at the time) are harmful for the government of the country because they would prefer and place their own narrow interests before the interests of the nation. Despite their resistance to the idea, the first political parties emerged already the first presidency of George Washington, and in 1796, after Washington decided to retire from politics, the two parties had the first bitter fight for the presidency. Ever since then, American political life has been dominated by two large national parties, except for short, transitory historical periods. Since the Civil War (1861–65), these political parties have been the same: the **Democratic Party** and the **Republican Party**.

The American **two-party system** is significantly different from similar European political systems with two large and dominant parties. In Europe, there is usually a large left-of-center and a similarly large right-of-center party,[99] but there are always at least one or two minor parties which have enough support to win seats in the national parliament. For example, in the British House of Commons besides the two dominant parties, Labour and the Conservatives, there is a third party with significant support (the Liberal Democrats) plus there are several regional (ethnic nationalist Welsh, Scottish or Northern Irish) parties present. In Hungary, while the right side of the political spectrum is dominated by one single party, Fidesz, there are a number of relatively small parties on the other side. Most other European countries (France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Poland, etc.) have typically two or three large and several other, small parties represented in their national legislatures.

In the US, on the other hand, **there has never emerged a permanent or long-standing third party** with a solid support from a significant minority of voters. From time to time, there were efforts to establish a third national party: most recently during

[99] Although this 'iron law' of most European party systems has recently begun to break down as one or both historically dominant parties have lost some of their stable support, especially parties on the left, for instance Labour in the UK or the Social Democrats in Germany, probably because their traditional social base, the industrial working class, has also significantly shrunk in number.

the mid-1990s, when Texan billionaire Ross Perot[100] ran as an independent candidate at the 1992 presidential election and, following his unexpected success (he collected 19% of the popular vote), he and his supporters organized the Reform Party in 1995 for his second campaign. But the party disintegrated within a few years after Perot himself retired from politics.

Political scientists disagree about the possible reasons for the lack of viable third parties in the US: some say the **winner-take-all system** of American elections (see ch. 9.3 for details) does not give a chance to minor parties to send their representatives to state or federal legislatures, which turns most voters away from them; others think that the two major parties are so varied in their social support that one or the other is acceptable for the majority of the voters, so they do not leave enough social base for a significant third party.

10.2. The organization of American parties

Despite the long history of parties in the US, American parties are far less powerful organizations than the parties in many European nations with parliamentary governments. **European parties are typically centralized organizations** with a well-defined hierarchy: a party in Britain or in Hungary usually has a group of leaders, elected by the national party congress or conference, who then make all the crucial decisions for the party. They decide what policies to be advocated and followed, and who should be nominated for various elected offices, including parliamentary seats. The highest leader of the party usually becomes the prime minister if the party manages to win the parliamentary election, and he or she appoints people to all the major political positions. Party discipline is usually strong and carefully maintained: MPs are expected

[100] *Ross Perot* (1930–2019): He was a Texas businessman who became a billionaire as one of the pioneers of electronic data processing. In 1992, he entered the presidential election as an independent candidate, financing his entire campaign out of his own pocket. A moderate conservative regarding his political views, he strongly criticized the Republican administration of George H. W. Bush for the ballooning federal debt, the Gulf War and NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement), which he considered detrimental to preserving American industrial jobs. He became surprisingly popular due to his sharp and witty remarks and in June 1992 some polls suggested he had more support than either the sitting president or Democratic candidate Bill Clinton. He collected 19% of votes nationwide, but he did not manage to win a single state, therefore he ended up with no electoral votes. In 1996 he ran again as the candidate of the Reform Party that was created to support his bid, but he received less than 10% nationwide and never posed a threat to Clinton's reelection. Afterwards, he retired from active politics and supported George W. Bush against the Reform Party candidate in 2000.

to support the decisions of the leadership, to vote for the party's proposals and even if they disagree with the official policy, they should keep their dissident opinion to themselves and not speak publicly against the 'party line'. Party rebels may easily lose the trust of the leadership and with it, their political position, job and influence.

In the US, parties developed along very different lines, partly because of the huge size of the country and partly because of the federal system of government. **Political authority is far more decentralized in the US than in any European country**, with each state having a wide range of authority over local law, business, education, public welfare, etc., which has made American party organizations decentralized too. Each state has its own party organization, and the state leadership of the party has traditionally made all the important decisions: what the party's opinion on local and national issues is, what policies should be followed, who should be nominated for state and federal political offices, who should be appointed to government-controlled jobs. Since the interests of local populations can be very different in various parts of the country (for example, an industrial state with many big cities has different problems and different needs from a sparsely populated rural, agricultural state), local organizations of the same party may often disagree over issues and policies. **The national parties are little more than coalitions of state parties, and national party leaders have essentially no control over state party leaders.**

The decentralized character of American parties has many crucial consequences. In the US, there is practically no such thing as a top national party leader. Each party has a **national committee** and a chair, but he or she is just a figurehead, having no power to issue orders or demand loyalty and discipline from other party officials. Neither party has annual congresses or conferences: the closest thing is the **national convention**, but it is held only once every four years, in the year of presidential elections, and its primary task is to nominate the party's candidate, not to choose national leaders or decide the party's policies. The convention usually accepts a so-called '**party platform**', which is a political document summarizing the party's opinions on the most important national political issues, but it is rarely valid for longer than the end of the presidential campaign, and party politicians are not required to stick to the principles contained in it; they are free to follow their own ideas if they wish.

Even the President is not a real head of his own party: although he is the best-known and usually the most prestigious figure in his party, he has no authority to tell Congressmenof his own party what to do, and disagreements between, for instance, a Republican

President and Republican senators or representatives regularly arise during day-to-day government. The principle of the **separation of powers** in the Constitution makes it impossible for the President to exercise strong pressure on Congress, including members of his own party (for details, see ch. 8.2, "President and Congress"). He cannot even threaten them with taking their seat in Congress away, because each federal politician is elected from a certain state, in which they are nominated not by the national or even the local party leaders but by local voters through primary elections. All representatives and senators know very well that, above all else, they must keep the interests and preferences of their local voters in mind or otherwise they risk losing their re-election. This dependence on local public opinion and support is often stronger than loyalty to one's own party and its official purposes or policies.

Another very important aspect of the American electoral system is that voters always choose between individual candidates of the two parties: there are no votes for party lists as for example in Hungary. Therefore, voters pay more attention to the individual candidates' proposals, programs, they form an opinion about their previous career and public character, and ultimately make up their mind on that basis. It is not uncommon that the same voter supports the candidate of one party at a state election but the other party's candidate at a Congressional or presidential election: the personality of the candidates is nearly as important as their party allegiance, even if mutual distrust and even outright hostility between supporters of the two parties has grown significantly during the past 20–30 years.

Finally, the relative weakness of American parties has perhaps one more reason: **the great majority of voters are not connected closely to either of the major parties**. In the US, formal party membership is an unknown concept: ordinary people do not have party membership cards, and do not pay membership fees. They express their party sympathy by voting for this or that party's candidates at local, state, or federal elections; by participating in a party's closed primary after declaring their preference at registration (for details, see subchapter 9.2, "Primaries"); or by donating money to party candidates or party organizations. All these are, however, voluntary actions, and party supporters are free to change their mind any time. According to a Gallup survey conducted regularly since 2004, about 25–35% of the American population describe themselves as strong supporters of one or the other of the two major parties, while about 30–40% identify themselves as independents.

One possible reason for this phenomenon is that a large number of Americans do not feel that politics is directly affecting their personal or family life. While Americans grumble about 'stupid politicians' probably as often as people in Eastern Europe, they do not tend to believe that the victory of this or that party at a congressional or presidential election will produce significant changes in their career, will improve or ruin their livelihood. The cycles of prosperity and recession in the American economy seem to follow each other mostly independently of politics, and the everyday circumstances of ordinary people are influenced more by the local or the state governments than the distant federal government in Washington. It is only during the times of national crisis that the majority of ordinary Americans turn their attention to the national government: such events in the 20th century included the Great Depression, World War II, the Vietnam War,[101] or the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001.

10.3. The character of American parties and political polarization

Both major national parties in the US include a wide range of people, opinions and interests, therefore it is quite difficult to give a general description of either of them. A general characterization is made more difficult by the fact that both parties have traditionally been governed by **pragmatism** rather than **ideology**. This means that **their overall purpose is to attract as many voters as possible**, and for the sake of popularity they are often willing to put aside theoretical principles. As a result, both parties like to advocate policies and measures that serve the interests or meet the wishes of many people and do not hurt or are not opposed by important social groups.

American political scientists have often argued that this pragmatic character of the American two-party system is a great strength of American democracy: since the majority of American voters are **moderate** or **centrist** in their political views, both parties tend

[101] Vietnam War (1964–1973): A gradually escalating military conflict, in which the United States supported South Vietnam against Communist North Vietnam as well as pro-Communist guerilla fighters in the South called Viet Cong. The limited involvement of US forces began to escalate following an incident in the Tonkin Gulf in 1964, after which Congress authorized President Johnson to utilize stronger military force. Despite an intensive bombing campaign against North Vietnam and the guerilla warfare against the Viet Cong, North Vietnam refused to make peace, and the increasing American casualties made the war more and more unpopular, especially among young Americans. Richard Nixon, who was elected in 1968, gradually reduced US military presence and ultimately pulled out all troops in 1973. The war ended with the defeat and occupation of South Vietnam by Communist forces in 1975. The US lost more than 58,000 soldiers in the conflict.

to **avoid radical** or **extreme ideas** and proposals in order not to alienate the moderate center. As a result, they prevent small radical parties or groups from gaining political influence or forcing their ideas on a reluctant majority.

This traditional wisdom, however, has been questioned by a rising tide of **political polarization** during the last three decades of American party politics. Since the 1980s, the Republican Party has become increasingly conservative and right-wing in its overall political ideology as well as its political goals, whereas the Democrats have lost their traditional Southern conservative wing (who mostly switched to the Republicans) and became more liberal, progressive, and left-wing in their political outlook. Both parties developed a radical right and a radical left wing, respectively, which – although representing a minority when compared to all the supporters of the party – are far louder and more uncompromising in their demands than the moderate wings of the party are. These radicals initiated the so-called **culture wars** in American public life, which focus on divisive political issues like abortion, gun control, death penalty, LGBTQ rights, drug policies, or religion in public life. Such issues typically provoke opposite reactions from liberals and conservatives and thus generate an "us v. them" mentality in both parties. Political polarization was increased by such public controversies as the impeachment of President Clinton in 1998, the War on Terror initiated by the government of George W. Bush in response to the 9/11 terror attacks, or the legalization of gay marriage by the Supreme Court in 2015, and reached its height during the unprecedented presidency of Donald Trump, who often used harsh, offensive language against his political opponents as well as the mainstream news media, and advocated certain policies that had been considered to fall outside the **political mainstream**. Trump was strongly disliked, occasionally even hated by most Democrats but became very popular among Republicans, who tended to believe even his wildest claims, above all his accusation that the 2020 presidential election was "stolen" by the Democrats. Trump's **populist rhetoric** amplified political distrust and hatred among the loyalists of the two parties, and increased **partisan loyalty** in Congress, which used to operate on practical political compromises.

The polarization of American politics is all the more surprising if you consider that both major political parties have traditionally **agreed on a number of fundamental principles**. They both respect the Constitution and the governmental framework built on it; they are both devoted to the ideas of individual freedom and equality before the law; they both protect private property and consider free enterprise and a capitalist economy

the cornerstone of the success and wealth of the US. Neither party tends to be sharply critical about American institutions and neither of them has ever advocated political or economic revolution. Neither party claims to serve the interests or advocate the views of any particular social group; for example, neither of them can be described as 'the party of workers', 'the party of farmers', or 'the party of businessmen'. Neither party represents the views of any church or Christianity in general, but neither is hostile to religion either: the majority of American politicians (just like their voters) in both parties belong to one of the many Christian denominations. In these respects, the two national parties have traditionally differed from the major parties in European countries, which historically relied on the support of a distinct class or social group (middle class in case of the right, working class in case of the left) and developed a corresponding ideology: major right-of-center parties in Europe tend to be Conservative or Christian Democrat, while major left-of-center parties are usually Social Democrat or Socialist.

However, each party has been characterized by certain preferences in both national, state, and local politics, over which there is more or less a general agreement among party officials and supporters. Some of these preferences come from the party's history; others have emerged out of the need to satisfy the party's loyal voters; and yet others are more or less ideological in character. The political polarization of the last few decades has generally amplified the ideological elements in each party's political outlook, so they have begun to vaguely resemble conservative and liberal parties in Europe, but these parallels are often more superficial than real.

10.4. The Democratic Party

The Democratic Party (https://democrats.org/) is the older of the two major parties: it was founded in 1828 to support the election of Andrew Jackson. Since the 1960s, it has defined itself and is seen by most voters as a **left-of-center party**; its most typical adjective is '**liberal**', but it is often referred to as '**progressive**'. It differs, however, from European liberal parties in several ways, especially in its social policies which are more similar to those of the social democratic parties in Europe. Its symbol is the **donkey,** and its color is **blue** (unlike most left-of-center parties in Europe). The group noun form of the name referring to the party's officials or voters is 'Democrats'. The adjective of the

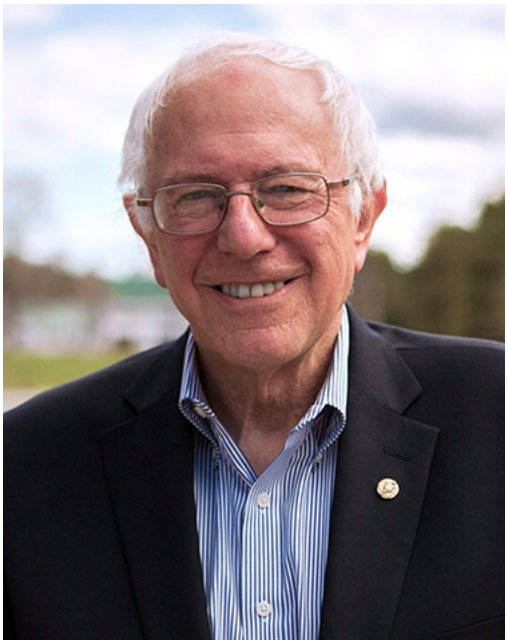
party's name sometimes also appears in the form 'Democrat' rather than 'Democratic', to suggest a distinction between the party and the general meaning of the common adjective.

The modern character of the Democratic Party has emerged from President **Franklin D. Roosevelt**'s **New Deal**[102] program of the 1930s, which combated the nationwide unemployment and poverty by initiating large-scale **social programs** overseen by federal agencies. Perhaps the most significant of the achievements of the New Deal was the federal **Social Security Administration,** which guaranteed **old-age pension** and **unemployment benefit** for the elderly and the jobless. President Lyndon Johnson's administration created the **Medicare** and the **Medicaid** programs to offer limited health-care assistance to those who needed it most: the retired and the poor. As a result, Democrats are traditionally considered more sensitive to the problems of the poorer groups in society.

Since the 1960s, the Democrats have devoted their attention to the problems of **racial and ethnic minorities**: they initiated laws against **racial segregation** and all sorts of **discrimination**, and supported government-sponsored programs to help blacks and Hispanics. Democrats are more sensitive to **violations of human rights**, and more often stand up to protect the rights and interests of women as well as **disadvantaged minorities**, like the disabled or LGBTQ people. As a result, the majority of certain social groups have traditionally supported the Democrats, such as industrial workers (especially members of **labor unions**), nonwhite minorities (especially African Americans), Catholics and Jews (who have traditionally felt disadvantaged and discriminated in a predominantly Protestant society), women's rights activists (usually called **feminists**), or **LGBTQ** activists. Some of these groups, however, are more radical and left-wing in their views than the mainstream of the Democratic party, so they organize themselves into **pressure groups** to influence the party's policy.

[102] *New Deal* (1933–1939): A program initiated by Democratic President Franklin D. Roosevelt after his election to combat the negative impact of the Great Depression on American economy and society. The New Deal consisted of a variety of laws, public programs and projects, and long-term reforms, which were targeted to achieve different objectives. In general, the New Deal was initiated and managed by the federal government, which took on a lot more active role in the regulation of the economy and the assistance of the poor and needy groups in society than ever before. Critics of the New Deal accused Roosevelt of presidential overreach, the creation of a dominant federal government limiting the autonomy of states, and an exaggerated intrusion into the free market and normal economic interactions. Although some New Deal programs were not successful and they did not end the Depression, they did help millions of Americans to survive the worst part of the crisis and made Roosevelt and his party very popular for decades.

In economic policy, Democrats have been in favor of **progressive taxation,**[103] that is, higher taxes on the middle class, rich people, and businesses in order to produce enough government income to finance their social programs. Democrats are usually more willing to stand up against the excesses of free-market capitalism: they more often initiate new laws or enforce existing laws regulating the activities of powerful multinational companies or **protecting the environment** from pollution and destruction. Democrats are also more strongly aware of the dangers of **climate change** and the necessity to initiate economic and social reforms to reduce its impact.



Bernie Sanders, Senator of Vermont (since 2007)[104]

Recently, there has emerged a vocal left wing within the party, represented by Senator and former presidential candidate **Bernie Sanders**,[105] which is openly critical about certain aspects of American institutions, but even if they describe themselves as "democratic socialists", they are not advocating the overthrow of the fundaments of the American free-market capitalism: their 'radicalism' mostly consists of promoting such reforms as **universal health care** available to all citizens (which exists all over Europe), the forgiving of **student loan debts** for college graduates, or higher taxes on the rich. In general, they rail against the fact that differences of wealth have sharply increased in American society, benefiting a small group of super-rich people while the broad middle class is struggling to maintain its living standards. But this does not mean that Democrats as a whole would be anti-business or anti-capitalist: on the contrary, many wealthy

[103] *progressive taxation*: a system of taxation that applies increasingly higher tax rates on people with higher income, based on the principle that wealthier people can afford to contribute relatively more to support the poor groups of society. The opposite system is called a flat taxation, when people pay identical rates regardless of how much they make.

[104] Source of photo: https://www.sanders.senate.gov/about-bernie/

[105] *Bernie Sanders* (born 1941): Former Representative and current Senator of Vermont, who achieved his electoral victories as an independent politician of left-wing political views. In 2016 and 2020, he entered the primary campaign of the Democratic Party and became surprisingly popular, forcing Hillary Clinton to a long primary struggle in 2016 and ending up second behind Joe Biden in 2020. Sanders has repeatedly described himself as a „democratic socialist", which makes him the major enemy of American conservatives, but the policies he has advocated are no more radical than what a European social democratic party would support: universal free health care, free college education, more regulation of big business, more labor rights, higher taxes on the rich. Despite his advanced age, most of his supporters tend to be young Americans.

businessmen are strong supporters of the party, donating millions of dollars for their purposes.

In fighting crime, Democrats tend to emphasize prevention rather than tough penalties: they see poverty and social disadvantages as the most important causes of crime and therefore urge more social programs to create alternatives to minority kids to gangs and drugs. They demand stricter **gun control laws** to reduce the number of guns in people's hands as a way to prevent violent crime, but their initiatives usually fail because half of Americans as well as the Supreme Court consider gun ownership an individual right of all citizens (for details, see ch. 11.5, "Landmark cases of the Supreme Court").

The Democrats are often criticized for their **'tax-and-spend' economic policies**: their critics claim that they drain money out of the economy and people's pockets to spend it on bureaucratic government programs that are ineffective and wasteful. Democrats are also criticized for creating an intrusive and all-too-powerful federal government which wants to regulate too many things in the national economy, and intervenes in too many aspects of public life, reducing people's freedom. '**Big government**' is a negative expression often used to describe this tendency of the Democrats by their conservative critics, even though the American federal government has much less influence over the everyday life of American citizens than practically any European government due to federalism (for details, see ch. 7.1, "The US Constitution"). The left wing of the party advocates some controversial and ideological policies: they are staunch supporters of **abortion** (describing themselves as **pro-choice**), criticize American society and culture for its **systemic racism,** and fight for the rights of minority groups they consider oppressed by the majority, such as LGBTQ people or **people of color** in general. Conservatives often attack radical Democrats as closet Marxists who hate traditional American values and want to promote their agenda by suppressing and destroying traditional morality.

If one wanted to summarize the general trend of Democrat policies in a simplified way, one might say that out of the two fundamental American values, Democrats place equality slightly ahead of individual freedom: not just equality before the law, but **equality of opportunity**, especially for poor and disadvantaged social groups. They also consider it the duty of the federal government to help these disadvantaged groups to better opportunities through targeted government programs.

10.5. The Republican Party

The Republican Party (https://www.gop.com/) is the younger of the two major parties: it was founded in 1854 in the North as an anti-slavery party, and it managed to get **Abraham Lincoln** elected as their first president in 1860. Since the 1930s, it has defined itself and is seen by most voters as a **right-of-center party**; its most typical adjective is '**conservative**'. The adjective can be misleading though, because the social policies of Republicans are typically conservative, but their economic ideas are characteristically liberal as they are typically great champions of free-market capitalism. The party's symbol is the **elephant,** and its color is **red** (unlike most right-of-center parties in Europe). The common abbreviation and nickname for the party is **GOP**, meaning 'Grand Old Party' (even though Republicans are the younger of the two national parties, but they celebrated themselves by this name as the winners of the Civil War).

The Republicans came to be defined as a conservative party after the 1930s, when they consistently opposed the reforms carried out by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. The basis of their criticism was a traditional distrust in the ability of the government, especially the federal government, to solve the economic and social problems of the nation. Republicans usually emphasize the responsibility of individuals to direct their own lives and make the best decisions, and they criticize all laws and measures that give too much power to the government as a danger to **individual freedom**. On similar grounds, they opposed the regulation of the economy by the federal Congress because such laws limit the **free market** and **free competition**, threaten efficiency and this way the prosperity of the national economy. They also criticized extensive social programs because they require higher taxes, again draining resources from the economy. Although later they never abolished the major social policies of earlier Democratic administrations, they maintained their criticism of the „big government" of the Democrats, because they argue that private individuals and private companies use their money more efficiently and more wisely than governments.

The conservative opposition to the domination of the federal government is often combined with a strong support for the autonomy of state governments (referred in American political slang as "**states' rights**"), especially because nowadays Republicans tend to dominate many sparsely populated states in the South, the Midwest, and the rural West. These regions often resent the intrusion of "Washington" into their lives as an unnecessary and harmful restriction of their freedom and scope of action.

The Republicans are usually seen as a **pro-business** party, which argues for less regulation and lower taxes for business companies and individuals, so many of their voters come from the predominantly white wealthier classes. Since the 1980s, when President **Ronald Reagan** kick-started the stagnating American economy by reducing the overall level of taxes, they believe in the idea that **tax cut**s are the most important tool of the government to stimulate economic growth. Since tax cuts result in less revenue for the federal government, they also advocate the benefits of a slimmer federal bureaucracy: they are particularly hostile to social programs and typically reduce government spending in these areas, but they are more generous when it comes to the **military budget**, since **Republicans tend to believe in the necessity of strong US armed forces** to defend the country and project American power abroad.

President Ronald Reagan, the icon of the Republican Party, in 1981[106]

They have characteristically conservative views on many social and moral issues: they protect the institution of the marriage and the family, oppose abortion and disapprove of children outside marriage as well as the extension of the rights of LGBTQ people. They dislike government programs that positively discriminate certain social groups like non-white minorities or women, arguing that it offends the basic American value of equality. They urge stronger laws against and tougher punishments for crime and support the maintenance of the **death penalty**. They tend to **oppose gun control laws arguing that it is one of the basic constitutional rights of Americans to own guns.** In general, they are more distrustful of foreign immigrants, and demand stronger measures to **limit illegal immigration**.

Since the 1990s, the strongly conservative right wing of the party has come under the influence of **Evangelical Protestants** (for details, see ch. 14.3, "Protestantism"), therefore many of the popular slogans of the party reflect their social and moral priorities, such a ban on legal abortion (described as **pro-life** position), more government support

[106] Source of photo:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ronald_Reagan#/media/File:Official_Portrait_of_President_Reagan_1981.jpg

for religious values and views, or the teaching of **creationism**[107] in schools as an alternative theory to Darwinian evolution. The surprise victory of Donald Trump in 2016, however, signaled a change in Republican support: he became a hero of many **white working-class** voters who supported his "America first" slogan especially in economic matters. As a result, the main supporters of the Republican Party these days are predominantly white, especially rural populations, many of them strongly religious Christians (especially Protestants but anti-abortion Catholics too). They receive a lot of votes from small-business owners and middle-class people working in business, members of the military, but also white urban working-class people who are unhappy with the decline of American industries in the past 40 years.

The Republicans are often criticized as 'the party of the rich', who do not care about the difficulties of poor people and protect the interest of wealthy businessmen and professionals. Republicans disagree, claiming that lower taxes on rich people and businesses produce economic prosperity which will ultimately benefit the poorer layers of society. This argument is often ridiculed as an excuse to let rich people pay less taxes: the economic idea is nicknamed '**trickle-down economics**'.[108] Since the Republicans have a lot more white and a lot fewer nonwhite voters than Democrats, they are also criticized especially by the radical left for representing **white nationalism** and **white privilege** and harboring prejudices against non-Christians, nonwhite minorities and LGBTQ people.

If one wanted to summarize the general trend of Republican policies in a simplified way, one might say that Republicans believe more in **individual freedom** than equality: they do not think that the government has the right or the means to promote social equality by interfering into economic and social processes. They tend to protect the freedom of the

[107] *creationism or creation science* (also known as 'intelligent design'): The idea that life on Earth has not emerged spontaneously and developed for millions of years following the Darwinian principles of natural selection, but it appeared relatively recently as a result of an „intelligent creator" – which is another name for God. Creationists are conservative Christians (predominantly evangelical Protestants) who continue to believe that the theory of evolution (first formulated by Charles Darwin in the 1860s) is false tenet intended to undermine belief in the Bible. They insist on the literal reading of the Bible and want to teach a Biblical view on creation as an alternative theory of the origin of life at biology classes.

[108] *trickle-down economics*: the origin of this ironic name goes back to the argument that tax cuts leave more money in the pockets of private individuals and businesses, which they use for consumption of goods and new investments, and that will benefit the economy and create more jobs, so this way the extra wealth of the rich will „trickle down" to the poor, improving their lot too. Economists have not found this theory to work in practice: all surveys show that differences of wealth between the rich and the poor increased dramatically in the US since the 1980s (according to the widely used slogan, "the rich got richer, the poor got poorer"), so tax cuts seem to benefit mostly the wealthier groups in society.

individual in issues like gun ownership or taxation. On the other hand, they are not liberal in public moral issues, where they tend to consistently represent the traditional moral convictions of religious Christians.

10.6. Key terms and concepts

centrist
culture war
extremist
left-wing / right-wing
moderate
national committee (Republican / Democratic)
partisan loyalty
party convention
party platform
political mainstream
political polarization
populist rhetoric
pressure group
radical
two-party system
winner-take-all rule

Democrats:
abortion
big government
blue
civil rights movement
climate change
disadvantaged minorities
discrimination
donkey
environmental protection
equality of opportunity
feminist
gun control
human rights
labor union
left-of-center
LGBTQ activists
liberal
Medicare / Medicaid
New Deal
old-age pension
people of color
pro-choice
progressive(s)
progressive taxation
racial / ethnic minorities
racial segregation
Roosevelt, Franklin D.
Sanders, Bernie
social programs
Social Security (Administration)
student loan debt
systemic racism
tax-and-spend economics
unemployment benefit
universal health care

Republicans:
conservative
creationism
death penalty
elephant
Evangelical Protestant
free market / competition
GOP (Grand Old Party)
gun rights
illegal immigration
individual freedom
Lincoln, Abraham
military budget
pro-business
pro-life
Reagan, Ronald
red
right-of-center
states' rights
tax cut
trickle-down economics
white nationalism
white privilege
white working class

11. The American Legal System and the US Supreme Court

11.1. The American legal system: an overview

The American legal system is characterized by two fundamental features: the heritage of the **English common law** which was also adopted by the former American colonies in the 17th and 18th centuries, and federated structure of the independent American republic, which created a two-tier legal system with a certain division of law-making authority. **Each state has its own constitution, laws and court system,** and the residents of any specific state are primarily bound to follow the laws of their state. **State law**, however, **must comply with the principles and rules of the US Constitution**, and there is an extensive body of federal laws and a federal court system to enforce them.

The heritage of English common law shows clearly in some American legal institutions, for instance the crucial role of judicial **precedents** in the decision-making of courts, the use of **jury** in criminal **trials**, or the preservation of such old English legal traditions as the right of **habeas corpus**. But modern US law is no longer dominated by common law, since most states have created their own **statutes** for most criminal acts and civil disputes.

The importance of **state law** cannot be overemphasized in the American legal system: most Americans' lives are primarily regulated by the laws of their own states rather than by federal law. **Criminal law is predominantly state law**: if somebody is charged with murder, they will be put on trial and **convicted or acquitted** under the laws of the state in which the murder was committed, and such laws may be significantly different. For instance, currently (in 2021) there are 23 states (and Washington D.C.) where **capital punishment** for any crime has been abolished or declared unconstitutional under state law, whereas it remains in force and is regularly administered in 13 other states; in the remaining 14 states, capital punishment still exists but nobody has been executed for some time. Therefore, it makes a huge difference if somebody is accused of murder in Texas, for instance, where the death penalty is legal and more than 100 people were executed between 2010 and 2019, or in Michigan, where capital punishment was abolished in 1846 and nobody was ever executed in its history.

A mock courtroom at the Law School of Notre Dame University (photo by Károly Pintér)

Most civil affairs are also regulated by state laws: each state issues their own **driver's licenses** under different requirements (e.g. minimum license age may vary between 14 and 17 years); they have different laws for marriage, divorce and **child custody**; they decide the legal drinking age in their own state and all the other rules regulating the legal sale of alcoholic beverages; they create their own public school systems and requirements; they set their own rules for voting at both state and federal elections; and so on. Significantly, each state has its own court system to handle its legal cases, with a state supreme court at its peak.

Besides the extensive body of state laws, there are also criminal and civil **federal laws**. The federal Congress designated certain crimes as **federal crimes**: if somebody commits such acts, they must be tried in a federal criminal court. Some typical federal crimes include counterfeiting of money (since U.S. dollars are issued by the federal government), tax evasion (since the federal income tax is collected by the IRS, a federal agency),[109] smuggling (legal import and export trade is regulated by federal laws), electoral fraud,

[109] For details about the IRS, see ch. 8.3, "Executive departments".

airplane hijacking, but also certain hate crimes like **lynching**,[110] or any act of violence against federal officials, including the President or members of Congress.

Among civil laws, the majority regulate **interstate commerce**, since goods and services flow without restriction across state boundaries, therefore there must be uniform laws nationwide to guide commercial transactions.

Law enforcement (a specifically American expression to cover all kinds of people and bodies involved in policing and fighting crime at local, state, and federal level) is also very decentralized in the US: each city and town has its own police force or department, headed by a chief, and subordinated to the mayor of that city. Their members are called **police officers** regardless of their gender. Rural counties traditionally have elected **sheriffs** to perform similar duties. States have their own highway patrols and similar bodies. The FBI is responsible for bringing the perpetrators of federal crimes to justice (see ch. 8.3 for details). In addition, there are various specialized police forces all over the country, such as campus police at colleges and universities, airport police, or the Capitol Police force responsible for the protection of the building of Congress.

11.2. The U.S. Supreme Court

The US Supreme Court (https://www.supremecourt.gov/) represents one of the **three branches of power** in the **federal government** of the United States. The main functions of the Supreme Court are briefly described in Article III of the US Constitution, while the appointment of its members is contained in Article II. The building of the Supreme Court is located in Washington DC.

The Supreme Court is the highest judicial body in the US, and its legal decisions are final, they can only be changed or modified by the Court itself. There are **9 members of the Court**, who are called **Justices**: the Court is led by the **Chief Justice**, and there are (since 1869) eight **Associate Justices**. **Each Justice is appointed by the President, but the majority of the Senate must confirm the appointment.** Justices may remain in their position during "good behavior" according to the

[110] *lynching*: unlawful execution by a group of people, usually a mob, without any trial or judicial procedure, mostly by hanging the victim. Lynching was a common way in the American South to "punish" blacks for alleged crimes committed against whites; in reality, most people murdered this way were innocent.

Constitution, which is understood as **lifelong terms or voluntary retirement**. Justices cannot be removed from the Court except by **impeachment** (for the rules of impeachment, see ch. 8.2, "President and Congress"). When a Justice dies or retires, the current President has the opportunity to appoint a new member.

The building of the US Supreme Court in Washington DC[111]

The Supreme Court today unites two different functions: it is the highest **court of appeal** in the US, while it also has **the final right to interpret the Constitution**. These two functions are separated in many European countries: in Hungary, for example, the first task is performed by the Hungarian Supreme Court (known since 2012 as *Kúria*), while the second is the responsibility of the Hungarian Constitutional Court (*Alkotmánybíróság*). The Constitutional Court is separated from the regular court system of the country: their sole responsibility is to decide whether laws or practices are in harmony with the country's constitution. Individuals, organizations, members of Parliament, or the President of the Republic may turn to the Court if they have doubts about the constitutionality of an Act of Parliament or the application of existing laws.

This is very different in the US: the Constitution limits the Supreme Court to dealing with "cases and controversies". Therefore, the Court does not give general opinions in response

[111] Source of photo: https://www.supremecourt.gov/about/courtbuilding.aspx

to people's petitions, does not review laws before they are signed by the President, and does not advise anybody on possible constitutional problems. **Its function is limited only to deciding specific cases**. In practice, it means that a constitutional problem can only be raised by a person whose constitutional rights are directly injured by the law or rule. For example, in Hungary the Constitutional Court declared capital punishment **unconstitutional** in 1990 after an ordinary citizen's petition. In the US, only a person sentenced to death could appeal to the Supreme Court questioning the constitutionality of the capital punishment. (Actually, there have been such appeals and Court has decided that capital punishment is not against the Constitution as long as it is performed without cruelty and the conviction followed proper legal procedure; see ch. 11.5 below, "Landmark cases of the Supreme Court").

The Supreme Court has original jurisdiction in a very small number of cases arising out of disputes between states or between a state and the federal government. Apart from these, **most cases reach the Supreme Court through appeals from lower courts**. The Court receives about 8,000 criminal and civil cases from lower federal as well as state supreme courts in one term, which lasts from one October to the next. Each case is assigned to a Justice who decides whether it merits examination by the Court. **Plenary review**, with oral arguments by attorneys, is held in about 100 cases per term. This means that the whole Court gathers and listens to the arguments of the two lawyers representing the two opposing sides of the case (in constitutional cases, the **defendant** or the **plaintiff** is often the federal government or a state government). Justices also ask both attorneys various questions. Then they retire to discuss the case, and either come to a unanimous decision, or take a vote. Since there are nine judges, there must be at least a 5-4 majority in favor of one opinion. Then one of the Justices is asked to write a formal written opinion (called **majority opinion**) in which he or she explains the reasons and the exact meaning of the decision. Justices who disagree with the decision of the majority may write **dissenting opinion**s or **minority opinion**s in which they explain why they refused to agree and why they think the decision is wrong. All the opinions are published and are available for all. Approximately 50–60 additional cases are taken care of without plenary review. (For details on how the Supreme Court works, see https://supremecourthistory.org/how-the-court-works/)

When the Supreme Court rules on a constitutional issue, that judgment is virtually final; its decisions are compulsory **precedents** for all lower federal and state courts, and they can be altered only by a new **amendment** to the Constitution (which is very difficult to

achieve, because it must be approved by two-thirds of both houses of Congress as well as ratified by three-fourth of all the states) or by a new ruling of the Court. However, when the Court declares a law unconstitutional, the state legislature or the federal Congress may pass a new law to eliminate the constitutional problem.

11.3. Judicial review and the role of John Marshall

Although the Supreme Court has been established by the Constitution along with Congress and the President, its functions and powers are defined much more briefly and far less precisely than those of the other two branches. For instance, the Constitution does not specify the number of the Supreme Court's members, and says nothing concrete about lower federal courts, leaving all these matters for Congress to decide. It is difficult to tell today why the Founding Fathers devoted so much less attention to the Supreme Court than to the other two branches of power. In accordance with the principle of the **separation of powers**, they obviously wanted to **guarantee the independence of the judicial branch**, that's why Justices are appointed for life and cannot be removed against their will except by impeachment. The principle of **checks and balances** also applies in a limited way to the Supreme Court, as the other two branches have some limited influence over judicial branch: the President can influence the Court by the selection and appointment of new Justices (although the Senate may refuse to approve his nominee), while Congress can pass legislation that changes the number of Justices or the system of lower **federal court**s. But apart from these, the Supreme Court itself, its procedures and decision-making are protected from interference by the other two branches.

The Constitution itself, however, gave no explicit authority to the Court to exercise any kind of control over the other two branches of power. In this respect, the Founding Fathers have either made a mistake or a deliberate omission, because **they left the checks and balances system incomplete.** It was the Supreme Court itself which corrected the error in 1803: in the case ***Marbury v. Madison***, the Court declared its exclusive right to **judicial review**, or the right to examine laws of Congress and determine whether they are in accordance with the Constitution. If not, the Court reserved the right to declare such laws void. Although the Constitution never explicitly gave the power of judicial review to the Supreme Court, it has become part of the constitutional

tradition, and as a result, the Supreme Court has become the guardian and interpreter of the Constitution.

The Court's opinion in *Marbury* v. *Madison* was written by Chief Justice **John Marshall**, perhaps the most important person in the history of the institution. Marshall remained on the Court for more than 34 years, from 1801 to 1835, and his vigorous and able leadership in the formative years of the Court was central to the development of its prominent role in American government. In the *Marbury* decision, the Chief Justice asserted that the Supreme Court's responsibility to overturn unconstitutional legislation was a necessary consequence of its sworn duty to uphold the Constitution. It is the task of the judicial branch to say what the law is. The Founding Fathers had worded the Constitution in rather general terms, leaving it open to future elaboration to meet changing conditions. In his landmark opinion, Marshall clarified that the interpretation of the Constitution is necessary, and it must be performed by the Supreme Court.

11.4. Members of the Supreme Court

The Supreme Court first assembled on February 1, 1790, in New York City, the nation's capital at the time. The prestige of the body was not very high at first, its earliest Chief Justices did not serve for long. It was John Marshall's long reign as Chief Justice that established the Supreme Court as the third branch of power truly equal to Congress and the President. After him, Chief Justices typically remained in office for long periods of time, sometimes over 20 years, with the result that from 1790 up to 2020, there have been only 17 Chief Justices (13 since Marshall) and 103 Associate Justices. Justices remain on the Court for an average of 15 years, but it is not unusual for a Justice to serve over 30 years. The current record holder is Justice William O. Douglas who remained a member of the Supreme Court for over 36 years, from 1939 to 1975. On average, a new Justice joins the Court roughly every 2 years, but this can be very irregular: sometimes the Court remains unchanged for long years (e.g. between 1994 and 2005), because nobody dies or decides to retire among its members, in other periods membership changes rapidly, for instance President Trump was lucky enough to be able to appoint three new Justices during his four years in office between 2017 and 2020.

The nine Justices wear black robes while in Court and are seated by **seniority**[112] on the Bench. The Chief Justice occupies the center chair; the senior Associate Justice sits to his right, the second senior to his left, and so on, alternating right and left by seniority. When the Justices assemble to go on the Bench and at the beginning of the private conferences at which they discuss decisions, each Justice shakes hands with each of the other eight. The practice is a reminder that despite differences of opinion on the Court, all Justices have an overall harmony of purpose.

Although Justices are protected from political influence during their membership, politics play a role in a president's selection of a Supreme Court justice. On average, a president can expect to appoint two new Supreme Court Justices during four years of office. **Presidents are likely to appoint Justices whose views are similar to their own** (that is, leaning in a conservative or a liberal direction) with the hope that these Justices will help them achieve their political goals by passing similar-minded decisions. For example, the Supreme Court under Chief Justice Earl Warren (1953-69) passed a number of liberal decisions, declaring racial segregation in schools unconstitutional, and reinforcing the separation of church and state in public life. In the 1970s, the Court continued this practice, legalizing abortion, and extending the rights of criminal suspects and defendants. As a result of the appointments of Republican Presidents between 1980 and 2008, since the 1990s the Supreme Court has had a small conservative majority (deciding some controversial cases 5-4). Many believe that this conservative majority decided the legal argument after the contested 2000 Presidential election in favor of George W. Bush.

The Supreme Court became the subject of political struggles once again in recent years. In the early 21st century, Republican President George W. Bush and Democrat Barack Obama both had the opportunity to appoint two new Justices each, which did not change the internal proportion of conservatives and liberals in the Court. In March 2016, one of the most senior and widely respected Justices, Antonin Scalia, died suddenly. Under the Constitution, it was the right and duty of President Barack Obama to nominate a new Justice in his place. Scalia, however, was the leader of the conservative wing of the Court, and Republicans worried that Obama was going to replace him with a liberal Justice.

[112] By „seniority" Americans always mean the person with the longer past or tenure in a certain office or position, not actual age. The Chief Justice may well be younger than some of the oldest Associate Justices, yet he is always considered the „most senior" Justice among the nine. Currently (in 2021), the most senior Associate Justice is Clarence Thomas, who was appointed to the Court in 1991, followed by Stephen Breyer, who is ten years older, but he became a Justice only in 1994.

Therefore, the Republican majority of the Senate – which must confirm the nominee according to the Constitution – decided not to give a hearing to Obama's nominee, arguing that it should be left to the incoming new president (presidential elections were to take place in November) to nominate a new Justice. In effect, they boycotted Obama's nomination in the hope that the Republican candidate wins the election. Their risky gamble succeeded: Donald Trump scored a surprise victory and promptly nominated a reliably conservative new Justice, Neil Gorsuch, who was quickly confirmed by the Republican Senate majority.

Four years later, history ironically repeated itself: the most senior liberal Justice, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, died in September 2020. Following their own earlier argument, the Republicans should have left the nomination to the new president, since the next presidential election was less than two months away. However, they did the exact opposite: they pushed the nomination of a conservative new Justice, Amy Coney Barrett, through the Senate at lightning speed in order to prevent the incoming Democratic President, Joe Biden, from nominating a liberal successor. This was a crystal-clear example of playing political games with Supreme Court nominations, but the gamble paid off: the Court currently has a 6-3 majority of conservative-leaning Justices, which gives high hopes to some Republicans: above all, they wish that the two Supreme Court precedents legalizing abortion would be overturned by the new Court (for the history of abortion decisions, see below in "Landmark cases").

It is important to point out, however, that despite their liberal or conservative leanings, Justices do not follow political expectations in a servile manner: quite the contrary, they are very proud of their judicial autonomy and freedom to form their own opinion about every single case coming before the Court. **Chief Justice John J. Roberts**, who was appointed by George W. Bush in 2005 and is generally considered a moderate conservative, has been particularly anxious to act as a kind of balance between the two wings, occasionally siding with the liberals in politically important decisions.

The US Supreme Court in 2021, with Chief Justice John J. Robert sitting in the middle[113]

The Court has also become more representative of American society in general over the past 50 years: the first black Justice was appointed in 1967, and the first woman was added to the Court in 1981. Currently, there are three female members, one black and one Hispanic member of the Court (who is also a woman). A curiosity – although hardly a significant fact – of the current Court is that the majority of the members (6 Justices) are Catholic and there is only one Protestant Justice, whereas during the history of the Court, the great majority of the members were Protestant.

11.5. Landmark Cases of the Supreme Court

There are a number of significant decisions made by the Supreme Court, especially those involving constitutional questions. In the following, there is a selection of important cases from the second half of the 20th and the early 21st century that have significantly influenced the life of ordinary Americans.

[113] Source of photo: https://www.supremecourt.gov/about/justices.aspx

Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka (1954): the most famous Supreme Court decision of the 20th century, which was the first federal legal decision against **racial segregation**. In the decision, the Supreme Court essentially overruled its own earlier precedent (created in 1896), in which they had ruled that racial segregation laws in Southern states were not against the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution. At that time, the Court had argued that the separation of different races (in that case, separate railway cars for whites and blacks in Louisiana) was not discrimination. The doctrine became known as „**separate but equal"**, and it helped maintain legalized racial discrimination in the South for more than half a century. This legal precedent was overturned by the Court in the 1954 decision, which ruled that racial segregation of public-school children was by definition unequal, because it created a feeling of inferiority in minority children. As a result, black children cannot be excluded from public schools formerly reserved for whites. This decision started the process of legal **desegregation** in the South.

Engel v. Vitale (1962): Perhaps one of the most unpopular decisions in the history of the Supreme Court, because it declared any form of **school prayer** (even if it is voluntary and nondenominational) forbidden by the "Establishment Clause" of the First Amendment of the Constitution. The Court argued that under the First Amendment, no federal, state, or local government may actively approve of or support religion, and public schools are maintained by state or local governments, therefore all forms of religious activity should be strictly excluded from public schools. Later, the Court reinforced its strict **separation of church and state** doctrine with several other controversial decisions, which remain unpopular among most religious Americans.

Roe v. Wade (1973): One of the most famous but also most controversial decisions of the Court, which found that women's right to terminate their pregnancy by abortion in the first trimester is included in the **right of privacy** and as such, is protected by the Fourteenth Amendment. The decision overturned a number of state laws which had previously banned abortion except in cases when the pregnant woman's life was in danger. This precedent was modified by another decision in 1992 (*Planned Parenthood v. Casey*), in which the Court upheld women's right to abortion but introduced the standard of "viability" or the ability of the fetus to survive outside the mother's womb. Abortion was declared a woman's right before viability. Anti-abortion or pro-life activists have been criticizing these precedents ever since, and some conservative Southern states have recently passed very restrictive abortion laws with the clear intent to offer a chance

to the conservative majority of the Court to overrule both *Roe* and *Casey*, a nightmare of feminists and liberals.

Miranda v. Arizona (1966): This decision significantly changed the procedure against criminal suspects, since the Court ruled that all suspects have a right to be informed about their **constitutional rights** to remain silent during interrogation and to have counsel (a lawyer) present. If the police or prosecutors receive statements from suspects who have not been informed about these rights, such statements cannot be used as evidence in the trial. In other words, police cannot extort admissions from suspects using psychological pressure while keeping them isolated from a lawyer. After the decision, it has become standard practice to read out the rights of a suspect immediately on arrest: it is called the **Miranda warning**, often seen and heard in many American movies ("*You have the right to remain silent. If you give up that right, anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney and to have an attorney present during questioning. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be provided to you at no cost. During any questioning, you may decide at any time to exercise these rights, not answer any questions, or make any statements.*").

Furman v. Georgia (1972): In this decision, the Court was asked to decide whether **capital punishment** falls under the „cruel and unusual punishment" category forbidden by the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution. Although the majority of the Court did not rule capital punishment itself unconstitutional, they observed that the death penalty is often imposed unfairly in many states. People are convicted to death for relatively less severe crimes, on the basis of uncertain evidence, and disproportionately many blacks are convicted. This decision led to the revision of **death penalty** laws and procedural rules in most states.

New York Times v. United States (1971): Also known as the Pentagon Papers case, it was a landmark decision regarding the **freedom of the press** in the United States. Two major American newspapers, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, obtained classified government documents, originally prepared for the Department of Defense in 1968, which analyzed American involvement in Vietnam in detail, and contained embarrassing information about the true intentions and considerations of the government. The papers began publishing excerpts from the documents in 1971, and the Nixon government attempted to prevent them from doing so by court order. The papers turned to the Supreme Court, which ruled that **the government cannot exercise censorship over the press by banning publication.**

District of Columbia v. Heller (2008): In this decision, the Court ruled that **the Second Amendment of the Constitution protects an individual's right to keep and bear arms**, therefore American adult citizens may keep guns in their homes for lawful purposes, such as self-defense. This narrow decision supported by the conservative majority of the Court essentially invalidated most state and federal efforts to restrict access to guns in order to prevent school shootings and other violent mass crimes that keep occurring at alarming regularity all over America. The 4-member minority argued that the original Second Amendment intended to protect the right of voluntary militia members to keep their arms and therefore does not apply automatically to all citizens, but their view remained a dissenting one.

Obergefell v. Hodges (2015): The most recent landmark Supreme Court opinion was also decided with a narrow, 5-4 majority, and it declared that the right to marriage extends to same-sex couples on the basis of the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment. Up to that point, 36 states had already legalized marriage between same-sex couples, but conservatives states did not allow such ceremonies to be performed and did not recognize the validity of same-sex marriages performed in other states, which went directly against the constitutional principle that states are required to mutually accept legally acquired marriage licenses from other states (similarly to birth certificates, driver's licenses, high school diplomas and many other official documents). As a result, **same-sex marriage is now legal all over the United States**.

11.6. Key terms and concepts

3 branches of power
amendment
appeal
Associate Justice
Brown v. Board of Education (1954)
capital punishment
checks & balances
Chief Justice
child custody
constitutional right(s)
convict / acquit
court of appeal
criminal law
death penalty
defendant / plaintiff
desegregation
driver's license
Engel v. Vitale (1962)
English common law
federal court

federal crime
federal government
federal law
habeas corpus
impeachment
interstate commerce
judicial branch
judicial review
jury
Justice
law enforcement
lynching
majority opinion
Marbury v. Madison (1803)
Marshall, John
minority / dissenting opinion
Miranda warning
plenary review
police officer
precedent
racial segregation
right of privacy
right to bear / keep arms
Roberts, John J.
Roe v. Wade (1973)
same-sex marriage
school prayer
seniority
separate but equal
separation of church and state
separation of powers
sheriff
state law
statute
trial
unconstitutional

12. General Education in the United States

12.1. Overview of general education in the US

In the United States, like in most developed nations in the world, the education system is divided into two broad levels: **general education** (for children below 18) and **higher education** (for adults over 18). This chapter is going to focus on general education, while chapter 13 will discuss higher education in America.

The American system of general education differs from those of most other developed nations in several crucial ways. First of all, **the US does not have a national system of education**. Since the Constitution does not state that education is a responsibility of the federal government, all educational matters are left to the individual states. Although there is a federal Department of Education (it was created only recently, in 1980), its function is merely to gather statistical data and other information about national education, to distribute federal educational aid, and to ensure equal access to education, prohibiting any sort of discrimination. Essentially, the control and regulation of education at any level is in the hands of the states. **Each of the 50 state legislatures is free to determine its own system, rules, and requirements for their state public schools.** They also provide their own funding for public education.

In most cases, however, state constitutions give the actual administrative control of the public schools to the local communities. The local communities elect the **school boards**, made up of citizens from the local community, which oversee the schools in each district, and their local community taxes largely support the schools. It is the school boards that set school policy and actually decide what is to be taught. According to a pithy slogan, education in the US is "a national concern, a state responsibility, and a local function."

As a result of that, American education is characterized by a great amount of variety and diversity, both in terms of school systems and the content of education. Therefore, it is extremely difficult to describe American education in general terms. Similarly to the legal system, the system of education varies from state to state. Children switch schools at different ages, their schools have different names, and they learn a wide range of different subjects at school in various states. In the following, those features are going to be summarized that are more or less valid for most (if not all) schools in the US.

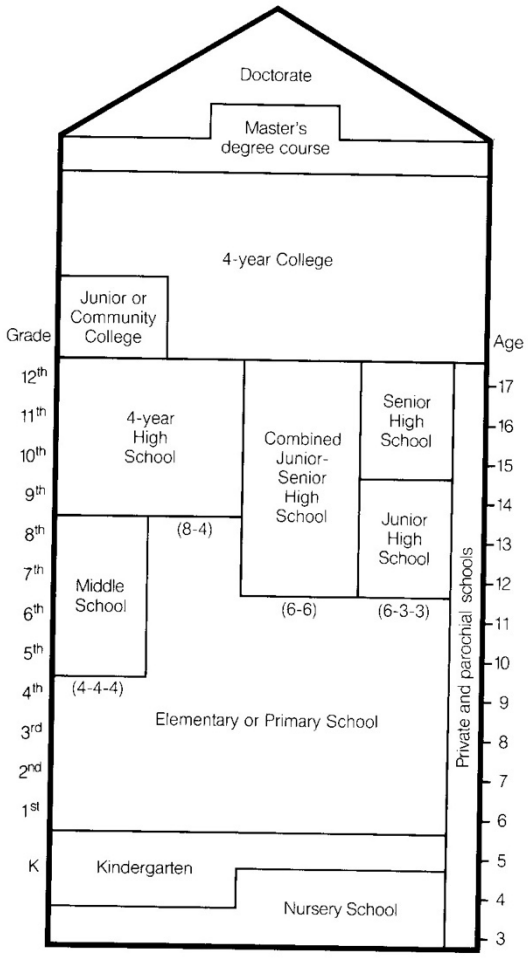
Attending school is considered a fundamental right of all Americans, while it is also compulsory for all children, usually up to the age of 16. Public education normally begins at age 4 or 5, with **kindergarten,** which is an exclusively American term (unknown in Britain, obviously an import of German immigrants to the US). Kindergarten consists of one or two preparatory years at school before proper instruction begins (therefore it is not the exact equivalent of Hungarian *óvoda*, because children go to kindergarten at a later age, it is shorter, and is typically not a separate institution but part of elementary schools). During this stage there is more emphasis on skills development and getting children acquainted with community than on formal teaching. After kindergarten, students enter **grade 1** (also called first grade) and they normally continue until **grade 12**. Most students complete the twelve grades from age 6 to 18, similarly to Hungary. The so-called **K-12 system** (from kindergarten to grade 12) is free, financed by the taxpayers' money in all states. Schools that are part of the K-12 system are normally called **public schools** by Americans; the term simply means 'schools open to the public', in other words, elementary or high schools financed by the state or local government, where no tuition is required. (Note that the term 'public school' has the exact opposite meaning in Britain, where it denotes fee-paying independent schools!)

A middle school in South Bend, Indiana, with a typical yellow school bus (photo by Károly Pintér)

There is considerable variety, however, in how the 12 grades are divided up between schools in each state. The lowest level is usually called **elementary school** in the US, and it may include grades 1–4 (age 6–10) or grades 1–6 (age 6–12). The next level may be called middle school in some states or junior high school in others; a **middle school**

typically includes grades 5–8 (age 11–14), whereas a **junior high school** educates children in grades 7–9 (age 13–15). The highest level of the public school system is the **high school**, which may take four years after middle school, grades 9–12 (age 15–18), or three years after junior high school, grades 10–12 (age 16–18). So American high schools are the closest equivalent to a Hungarian secondary school (*középiskola* or *gimnázium*), but they are not part of higher education, therefore it is a huge mistake to translate them into Hungarian as *főiskola*. The possible combinations of the various kinds of public schools are illustrated by the chart below.

The United States Educational Structure



Besides the various types of public schools funded and run by the states, there are also a large number of **private schools** in the US, which are maintained by a variety of different organizations, and maintain themselves from – at least partly – the **tuition** paid by the students (or rather, the students' parents).

According to the most recent data of the National Center for Education Statistics (which are from 2017-18), there are more than 130,000 K-12 schools in the US, including all types of public and private schools. Among them, over 98,000 are public elementary and secondary schools, which are attended by more than 50 million students, while more than 32,000 are fee-paying private schools that teach about 5.7 million students.[114] That means that **roughly 90% of all schoolchildren attend public schools and 10% go to private schools**. On the other hand, private schools make up almost 25% of all schools, which shows that the average private school educates a lot fewer

[114] In American English, schoolchildren of all age groups are referred to as 'students', from elementary school to university. The word 'pupil', which is commonly used in Britain, is practically unknown in the States.

children than a typical public school. An average American public school in a city or a suburb has about 500-600 students.

As these data show, private schools are not uncommon in the US, but their character is significantly different from the exclusive and often elitist atmosphere of most British independent schools. Over three-fourths (75%) of private schools are **sectarian schools**, founded and maintained by a religious denomination. Catholic schools alone represent 37% of all private schools in the US, which means that roughly **every third private school is a Catholic school**, operated by the local diocese or a wide variety of religious orders. Nonsectarian private schools are a relatively small minority (below 25% of all private schools) in the US, but many of these institutions cater for the children of wealthy parents who wish to educate their kids in a shielded environment with well-paid, well-prepared teachers and a stronger educational program.

There is also a third, increasingly popular option for parents who do not wish to send their children to public schools for some reason and cannot afford private schools: it is **homeschooling**, which may mean two things. Either one of the parents (mostly the mother) stays at home with the children and adopts the role of the teacher as well, or the parents hire private tutors to educate their children at home. It is also possible that several homeschooling families hire one teacher to teach all their children as a small class. Homeschooling was seen as an unusual and somewhat quaint practice until the 1990s, favored by either conservatively religious people who wanted to shield their children from harmful moral influences, or by left-wing radicals who believed that traditional methods of schooling are old-fashioned and ineffective, and child-centered alternative ways are much superior. But it has come into fashion in the last 30 years, and in the late 2010s nearly 2 million school-aged children (about 3% of the total) were homeschooled in the United States. Each state regulates homeschooling differently: most states require parents to inform the local school district if they choose to homeschool their children, and the majority prescribe the teaching of certain specific subjects, but only twenty states mandate that homeschooled children regularly undergo some kind of academic assessment. This is a good illustration of the overall laxity of educational requirements in the US, which is the exact opposite of the extremely centralized, strictly hierarchical and strongly content-centered Hungarian education system.

The changing racial proportions of the US (see ch. 6 for details) are clearly reflected in school enrollment: in 2018, **less than half of all public-school students (47%) were white**, whereas 27% were Hispanic, 15% black, 5% Asian, 4% bi- or multiracial and

1% Native American. These figures reveal two trends: on the one hand, the growing proportion and the higher birth rate of non-white social groups, but also the increasing tendency among wealthy middle-class white parents to avoid the public school system altogether and enroll their children into private schools of some kind or choose the homeschooling option.

12.2. The objectives of American general education

Many Europeans share the general and obviously prejudiced view that most Americans are ignorant about the rest of the world, and their knowledge is especially limited about European history and culture. This general notion probably contributed to a rather low opinion on the American public education system among Europeans. Lower emphasis on facts and data, and the lack of tough expectations in public schools are often blamed for the perceived 'ignorance' of Americans. While there are few entirely objective methods by which the quality of different education systems could be compared, Hungarian secondary school students who studied one or two years in an American institution usually come away with the impression that American high schools are 'easy': there are significantly fewer classes per week, the content of the courses is much lighter especially in math and natural sciences, and they do not have to break their back to score well on tests or satisfy the requirements. At the same time, they usually say that school time in the US is 'more fun': the textbooks are carefully structured and easy to understand, teachers are helpful and entertaining, teaching focuses on a lot on practice, skills development and individual research, and the lower classload allows students enough time to enjoy extracurricular activities, such as sports, music, creative arts, or many other interests.

Such contrasts between Hungarian and American schools are rooted in fundamental differences in educational philosophy. American general education cannot be simply evaluated as 'good' or 'bad': it has a variety of goals and corresponding methods which may not match the goals and methods of the Hungarian general education system.

Perhaps **the oldest purpose of American public education is to educate republican citizens**; in other words, to teach children the basic values of American democracy, and to equip them with such fundamental skills (primarily the ability to read

and write) as to enable them to participate in public affairs. Illiterate people cannot read the newspaper and the ballot paper, and most probably do not have enough information and learning to make informed choices at political elections. This argument was a major motivation behind the establishment of free, tax-supported elementary schools in most states.

The second purpose is closely related to the first: **free and compulsory public schools have the important task of integrating, "Americanizing" the children of immigrants** as well as a wide range of different racial and ethnic groups. In such a radically multi-ethnic and multicultural country, public education should create a sense of community and identity by emphasizing the bonds that keep the American nation together. This task became especially important in the second half of the 19th century, when large numbers of immigrants arrived in the US from various European countries as well as from East Asia (see ch. 4.4, "Immigration in the late 19th century" for details). These people spoke different languages, followed different faiths, had different cultural backgrounds and histories, which made educators' task extremely difficult. Thus, **patriotic education** focused on national values and symbols acceptable to all. The universal right of freedom and its defense against tyranny is the central message of the American War of Independence; the Constitution established such democratic principles as an elected government, federalism, and the separation of powers; while the Bill of Rights laid down such individual civil rights as freedom of religion, freedom of speech and press, protection from illegal imprisonment and trial by jury (for details, see ch. 7.1, "The U.S. Constitution"). These fundamental achievements of the Founding Fathers constitute the heritage of all Americans, regardless of race, ethnicity, or creed. The American flag was chosen as a general symbol of these values, and the **Pledge of Allegiance** to the flag became the most widespread 'patriotic ritual' in public schools throughout the US (for details, see ch. 2.4 about the American flag).

The third purpose also follows from the other two: **public education should offer equal opportunity to all American children to fulfil their potential**, to get a chance for a career and rise in society, **regardless of social class, national origin, or racial or ethnic group**. This purpose, although it has been present as an ideal ever since the emergence of independent US, remained an illusion rather than reality for a long time. Non-white children, especially segregated blacks, but also Hispanics and Asians, were denied the educational opportunities available for middle-class white kids. After World War II, especially as a result of the **civil rights movement**, equal opportunity

became perhaps the most central issue in American education. The first step towards realizing equal opportunity was the **desegregation**[115] of public schools in the South, providing access to better schooling for black kids.

Despite such legal efforts, however, differences remained huge between various public schools, because they are maintained primarily by local and state taxes. Communities and states that are able or willing to pay more for schools, buildings, materials, and teachers almost always have better educational systems than those that cannot or will not. Rural farming communities and poor inner-city districts have less money available for school buildings, teaching materials, and teacher salaries. More money is spent on the education of a child living in a wealthy district than a child living in a poor community. Just one example: according to the National Education Association, public elementary and secondary school teachers earned an average salary of about $65,000 nationwide, but the differences between rich and poor states are huge: in wealthy and expensive states on the East and West Coast like New York, Massachusetts or California, average salaries are over $85,000 a year, while similarly qualified teachers received less than $50,000 in such rural and relatively poor states as South Dakota or Mississippi – barely more than half of the New York salaries.[116]

Federal and state governments in the past forty years have made various efforts to reduce differences in educational opportunities. Public policy and legal decisions have increasingly emphasized special rights for racial, ethnic, and linguistic minorities in the area of education. The federal Bilingual Education Act was passed in 1968 mostly on the demand of Hispanic organizations, who protested that Hispanic children perform poorly at school and drop out early simply because many of them cannot speak English well. The Act as well as subsequent court decisions ordered that children whose first language is not English must be offered classes in their mother tongue, be it Spanish, Navajo, or Chinese, while also taking English language classes. The underlying idea was that in about three years, students' proficiency in English should be brought to a level that is sufficient for continuing their studies in English. The program's necessity seems to be justified by Census Bureau data: in 2020, more than 67 million Americans spoke another language than English at home, and about 25 million spoke English "less than very well". More than

[115] *desegregation*: A short term for ending segregation practices in schools or other public institutions, in other words, allowing segregated groups (in case of 1960s US, American blacks) to enter these institutions as equals.
[116] It is an unexpected and startling fact, however, that Florida public school teachers are also among the worst-paid in the nation, although Florida is neither rural nor a poor state.

60% of both groups are native Spanish speakers, the rest represent a variety of Indo-European and Asian languages.

Altogether, around 80 languages are being used for instruction in American schools, with mixed results. Supporters of bilingual education argue that by receiving education in their first language, students' ability to read and learn in both languages is improved, while their ethnic identity and self-esteem is boosted. Opponents counter that students participating in bilingual education become fluent in English later, while their educational achievements are often poorer than those minority kids who studied all subjects in English from the start.

It is also difficult to lessen differences in social background and racial origin by means of education. One attempt adopted in many large cities from the late 1960s was the so-called "**busing"** of children. This controversial practice wanted to desegregate schools by transporting children by bus not to the school closest to their home, but to another, more distant school, where the ethnic composition of the population was significantly different. For example, many inner-city black children were taken to schools with predominantly white pupils, or vice versa. The goal was to create the same racial proportion of children from various racial or ethnic groups as the one existing in the city's population overall. Many white parents protested the practice, since they were worried about their children's safety and the social and criminal problems inner-city blacks import to their schools (e.g. drug abuse, gangs, shootings). In many areas, whites began sending their children to private schools or moved to the suburbs outside city limits. Busing programs were mostly discontinued in the 1980s and 90s, and **residential segregation** (the spontaneous separation of white and non-white residential neighborhoods) continues to dominate many urban public schools.

In the 1970s, measures to protect minorities from discrimination were extended to both physically and mentally disabled children. Since public schools were ill-equipped to handle their special needs, disabled children had to attend expensive private schools. In 1971, federal courts ruled that public schools should take measures to accommodate disabled children, including the removal of physical obstacles, the employment of special instructors, and installment of specialized equipment where necessary. All this has been achieved in practically all public schools by the 1990s.

12.3. Educational philosophy and life in American public schools

As equal opportunity considerations have become so central in public schools in the past 50 years, most public schools have placed less emphasis on tough requirements, since the primary purpose has been to accommodate as many different children as possible, including kids with a non-English mother tongue, disadvantaged social background, or learning disabilities. The relative lack of educational rigor in modern public schools is also partly the outcome of the educational philosophy and methodology developed by **John Dewey**. Dewey was a powerful critic of 19th century humanistic education (represented mostly by grammar schools), which relied heavily on memorization by rote (mechanical repetition of a word, sentence or piece of information until one automatically remembers it by heart). Dewey argued that such methods kill the joy of learning and do not provide real, usable knowledge since most students do not understand what they are forced to memorize. He proposed alternative methods, such as "learning by doing", connecting theory and practice (e.g. learning physics while preparing a meal in the kitchen), and giving students individual assignments by which they can utilize their natural curiosity and discover something on their own. Dewey's theory was based on sharp psychological observations, but many of his followers misunderstood his ideas, and his most lasting legacy remained the relative disregard for 'dry' facts and 'boring' data.

American public-school **curricula** (set of courses and their contents) – as opposed to Hungarian ones, for instance – have long given up the encyclopedic approach, that is, the attempt to survey the length and breadth of a given subject. American students do not study the complete history of the world or the Western civilization (but they are usually required to cover the history of the US), they do not read every major work of American literature, are not given a comprehensive introduction to physics, chemistry, or biology (these subjects are often combined into a more general Science class), mainly for two reasons. On the one hand, American educators decided that the time available in general education is simply not enough to cram all that information into every teenager's head, therefore they must be more selective when determining compulsory curricula. On the other hand, Americans have an entirely different concept of what constitutes 'useful knowledge'. They consider it unnecessary for the average person to possess a wide range of general learning. In order to be decent citizens and useful members of society, they primarily need practical skills related to their vocation or career, and they can learn more specialized knowledge in higher education. Accountants, for example, need good skills in

math for their job but they can perform their job perfectly well without being familiar with the theory of relativity or the works of Shakespeare. This practical view of education, although not shared by all Americans, determines the curricula in most American public schools.

American schools have a relatively narrow '**core curriculum**' (subjects compulsory for all students). Almost every public school instructs children in mathematics, English, Science (a combination of physics, chemistry, and biology), social studies (a subject combining elements of geography, history, sociology, and political studies), IT (information technology), music or art, and physical education. In addition to this core curriculum, high school students already have the opportunity to choose **elective courses** in their areas of interest out of a wide range of possibilities.

Local control of the schools means that there is a great deal of flexibility both in the core curriculum and in the range of electives. In about two-thirds of the states, local schools are free to choose any teaching materials or textbooks that they think are appropriate. In the remaining states, teaching materials used in public schools must be approved by the state **boards of education** (the equivalent of a department of education in a state). Local school boards often experiment with new programs to meet the community's wishes and needs.

High school students at the same grade level do not all take the same courses. Students who do not plan to go to college may be enrolled in classes such as basic accounting, typing, or agricultural science, which prepares them for **vocational** or technical positions (vocational education or training is intended to prepare students for a particular trade or profession rather than higher education). Students aiming at college may be enrolled in college-preparatory courses such as chemistry, political science, or advanced writing, more academic subjects required for college work. Talented and ambitious students may take so-called **honours classes** in history, English or science, which are more demanding and cover more material.

What makes American education at the secondary level different from most other countries is that all such programs, whether academic, technical, or practical, are generally taught under one roof. **The American high school is therefore best seen as if it were a combination of all the various types of schools** which are usually separated and kept in separate buildings in other countries. To use a Hungarian parallel, an American high school is a Hungarian grammar school (*gimnázium*) and vocational or

technical school (*technikum, szakközépiskola*) rolled into one. Although most high school students in America are following different 'tracks,' or courses of study, Americans feel that they should be kept together as long as possible. They feel that students pursuing different educational goals should learn together and thereby learn to get along together. An American high school includes all the students within the age group, not just those with similar ambitions and skills.

In most American high schools, the Hungarian idea of a 'class' (a group of 20-30 students who spend most of their school time together, sharing the same classes and teachers except for a few 'optional' classes) is completely unknown. In American English, a '**class**' means (besides a school lesson) **all the students belonging to the same grade**; they often talk about 'the class of 1995', for example, meaning all those people who graduated from the school in that year. In an average urban or suburban high school, such a 'class' may include a hundred or more students. The school day typically starts at around 8 o'clock every morning and classes often do not finish until 3 or 4 o'clock in the afternoon (this includes the lunch break as well as music, art, and afternoon sports). Since each student takes different classes and follows different tracks, they move from classroom to classroom and work together with different students each time. As a result, closely-knit groups similar to Hungarian secondary schools rarely develop in American high schools; kids have few close friends and a lot more casual pals.

The weekly schedules usually follow a steady pattern that is easy to remember for kids: they may have the same classes in the same order each day, or courses may be on alternate days, for instance in a Monday-Wednesday-Friday or a Tuesday-Thursday rhythm. The length of classes and their arrangements may vary from state to state and from school to school, but a typical class is between 45-55 minutes in length, followed by 5-10 minute breaks. Compared to Hungary, there are a lot of characteristic differences: children are almost always transported to and from school either by their parents' car or by the **school bus** familiar from many American movies (which is a free service available to any children in a given school district). They also get free meals during the day and do not have to pay for their textbooks either. While American kids are not well-known for their strict discipline, missing classes or being late for classes are considered serious offences and are duly punished. Cheating of any kind is tolerated by neither teachers nor fellow students, who often report cheaters to the teacher; the American view is that cheaters are trying to gain unfair and undeserved advantages over their fellow students, so reporting a cheater is a duty, not morally dubious 'squealing.' In big cities, schools are protected by security

guards who do not allow students in or out of the building during school day. In some inner-city schools, there are metal detectors at the entrance, and students' lockers are regularly searched in order to find hidden guns or drugs.

Contrary to the popular images suggested by some Hollywood movies, most American students respect their teachers and speak politely to them. On the other hand, they are ready to challenge and argue with their teachers if they feel that their work has been evaluated unfairly, therefore the rules and methods of course evaluation are usually described in detail and in writing at the beginning of each semester.

Course work relies heavily on reading assignments, home essays, individual research projects, and other methods aimed at developing students' skills to find and select relevant information and turn it into a presentation. Students are encouraged to think critically, give their own opinion on issues, and try to justify them with objective arguments. As a result, while American students' factual knowledge is often inferior to students from other countries, they tend to be more resourceful in handling individual work, more outspoken about their personal views, and more willing to ask questions and criticize established opinions.

Students' work is commonly evaluated by a scale of 5 grades: the best is A, followed by B, C, and D, which is the lowest pass grade, while F stands for 'failure'. These grades are often modified by + and – signs, indicating slightly better or worse performances. For instance, a B+ is better than a simple B, but not as good as an A–. Students' overall academic achievement is measured by their **GPA**, or **grade point average**, where their grades are translated into numbers (A=4, B=3, C=2, D=1, F=0), but honours or advanced placement courses are rewarded with higher numerical grades, producing a weighted GPA.

Like schools in Britain and other English-speaking countries, schools in the U.S. have also always stressed "character building" or "social skills" through extracurricular activities, including organized sports. There is usually a broad range of extracurricular activities available. Most schools, for instance, publish their own student newspapers, and some have their own radio stations. Almost all have student orchestras, bands, and choirs, which give public performances. There are theater and drama groups, chess and debating clubs, etc. Students can learn flying, scuba-diving, or mountain-climbing. They can act as volunteers in hospitals and homes for the aged and do other public-service work. Sports are especially important, because talented **athletes** (the word is used for all kind of

sportspeople in American English, not just for people doing athletics) are offered full scholarships by colleges and universities. The most popular American college sports are football, baseball, and basketball, but scholarships in soccer (which is an especially popular sport among women in the US), volleyball, ice hockey, athletics, tennis, or swimming are also available.

Secondary education is not finished with any sort of standardized examination like the British GCSE or the Hungarian *érettségi*: it would be impossible to introduce any such exam nationwide, since each state is free to legislate about its own educational system. High school is concluded with a spectacular **graduation ceremony**, where the graduating class wears long gowns and special, flat-topped caps. Schools invite a famous and respectable personality (it might be a school alumnus, a politician, a scholar, or an actor) to give the so-called **commencement address** at the ceremony. A chosen student, usually one of the best in the class, also makes a speech. Students receive a **high school diploma**, which proves that they have completed their secondary education. Such a diploma in itself, however, is not enough to gain entry into higher education: they usually need to take standardized tests for that (see ch. 13 for details).

Although high school graduation is still a traditional occasion for celebration among family and friends, it is not a very special achievement. According to the statistics of the federal Department of Education, about 88% of all people above the age of 25 have completed high schools. Although **the average dropout rate** (the proportion of those students who drop out of high school before graduation) **is low**, there are significant differences between racial groups. Among whites, completion rate is 93%. Among blacks, the rate has significantly improved since the early 1970s: at that time, less than 60% of blacks finished high school, whereas in 2019 87% of them did. **The worst figures are produced by Hispanics**: in 2019, only about 70% of Hispanics finished high school, so they represent the largest group among high-school dropouts. This is probably due not only to the poverty and other social disadvantages of Hispanic students but also the disadvantages presented by their Spanish mother tongue in an English-language school environment.

12.4. Reform efforts in general education

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the American federal government had practically nothing to do with general education, as it was an exclusive responsibility of the states. This situation, however, began to slowly change from the 1940s: the Supreme Court handed down a number of decisions which concerned themselves with the civil rights of public-school students (e.g. they cannot be required to recite the Pledge of Allegiance, they must not compelled to pray in the morning etc.), culminating in the landmark decision of *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 that declared racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional (for details, see ch. 11.5, "Landmark cases"). Although it took more than a decade to actually enforce this ruling all over the country, the 1964 Civil Rights Act authorized the federal government to intervene in state public schools in case such violations occurred.

Another federal reform effort began also in the mid-1960s, which offered financial assistance to poor school districts in order to reduce the enormous differences of quality between the public-school systems of various states. Studies showed that low-income children produce the poorest results and drop out most often from general education, therefore federal funds were intended for those schools where low-income kids made up at least 40% of the student body. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 represented the first substantial federal involvement in the financing of general education in the US.

From the 1980s, the American public became increasingly concerned about the quality of American public schools as results of standardized tests showed a continual decline in students' academic achievement. Researchers found an alarmingly high level of **functional illiteracy**[117] among high-school seniors, especially among minority kids. Math skills of American students were lagging behind the students of most other developed nations. Some college freshmen needed **remedial education**[118] to be able to start standard college courses, because their skills in reading, writing and math are so poor.

As a result of these findings, federal government programs began to change focus from supporting poor students and schools to improve academic achievement by offering additional funding. The largest federal assistance program intended to improve the

[117] *functional illiteracy*: Scientific expression to describe the reading skills of people who are not fully illiterate, that is, they can read and write but their reading skills are so poor that even if they manage to read short texts with some difficulty, they do not grasp its meaning, they are essentially unable to make sense of it.
[118] *remedial education*: education intended to bring certain students who are lagging behind in some subject of skills up to the level of the average student body.

quality of general education was passed by Congress in 2001, named No Child Left Behind Act.

The Act offered more federal aid to general education than ever before, but under strict conditions. States were required to set up a system to measure the progress of public schools each year. The system may include several elements, such as annual **standardized tests** for certain graded in reading and math, graduation rates for minority groups, and other indicators. Schools should demonstrate adequate yearly progress to receive federal money; those schools that fail to improve their results for three years are required to reorganize themselves, devise new curricula, fire some of the teaching staff and hire new teachers, etc. Parents whose children attend one of these '**failing schools'** get the option to transfer their children to another, better school. The Act also set up new, additional requirements for teachers. Schools are required to provide parents with detailed information about the school's current progress, the quality of teachers, and other facts, in order that parents can make informed decisions about the future of their kids.

The Act was controversial from the start, and it was criticized from many directions. The measurement of the schools' progress is heavily based on annual testing, but many experts questioned if this is indeed an adequate way to decide whether a school is good or not. Students' progress depends on their family and social background as much as on their school. Besides, testing can be manipulated too: states are free to introduce any kind of standardized tests, and if the tests are constructed to be very easy, spectacular progress can be produced – on paper. Teachers may be forced to prepare their students specifically to perform well at the tests rather than giving them more comprehensive instruction. Subjects not tested (e.g. history, social studies or art) are threatened with neglect at the expense of reading, writing and math. Other critics attacked the idea that 'failing schools' are threatened with sanctions rather than offered extra help by the federal government. The Act's emphasis on giving parents the right to remove their children from poorly performing schools also did not meet with universal agreement.

Nowadays, despite state and federal efforts to improve the overall quality of public schools in the US, there is a widespread perception among the American public that the quality public school education is below the level of most private schools, therefore wealthy middle-class parents tend to send their kids to private schools, which charge tuition for their services. Many of these parents choose **parochial schools** not because the family is religious but because of their better quality, for instance Catholic private schools are

popular among Protestants and non-religious parents too. Conservative school reformers have promoted the idea of "school choice" for low-income inner-city families by offering them **school vouchers**. Vouchers are issued by the city government for needy families and they can be used to pay for the tuition of local private schools instead of the public school the student would otherwise attend in their own school district. Liberals criticize the idea of school vouchers because they think it siphons off ambitious and motivated students from the public school system, further reducing the overall quality of the student body, and they also accuse promoters of the program of indirect support of private schools, since the tuition of these students are ultimately paid from public funds. Defenders emphasize the individual benefits for those students who can escape the inferior local public schools and get a chance for a better education this way.

12.5. Key terms and concepts

athlete
board of education
busing
civil rights movement
commencement address
core curriculum
curriculum / curricula
desegregation
Dewey, John
dropout rate
elective course
elementary school
equal opportunity
failing school
functional illiteracy
general education
GPA (grade point average)
grade 1 to 12
graduation ceremony
high school
high school diploma
higher education
homeschooling
honours class
junior high school
K-12 system
kindergarten
middle school
patriotic education
Pledge of Allegiance
private school
public school
remedial education
residential segregation
school board
school bus
school voucher
sectarian school / parochial school

standardized test
tuition (fee)
vocational education

13. Higher Education in the United States

13.1. General characteristics of higher education in the US

Higher education in the US differs from general education in several crucial ways, but the most important is the necessity to pay large amounts of **tuition fee** in practically all American colleges and universities. A very small number of scholarships (sometimes from local, state, and federal governments, but more often from private donors, foundations, and charity organizations) is available to exceptionally talented and/or very poor students, and there are special sports scholarships for talented athletes. Apart from this small minority, however**, the great majority of Americans have to finance their own college or university studies**. The amount of tuition may range from a few thousand dollars per academic year (in public colleges and universities, which are partly financed by the city or the state they are in, and therefore charge lower tuition fees for local students) to $30–40,000 or more per year in prestigious private colleges and universities. The price of a particular college or university is a crucial factor to consider when students choose a higher educational institution. Otherwise, the choice is enormous: there are more than 4,000 colleges and universities in the US, including public, private, church-related, small and large, two-year and four-year institutions. Despite the high costs, **over 60 percent of all high school graduates enter colleges and universities**, because they know very well that a college or university degree is the key to a well-paid job and a successful professional career. However, **dropout rate in American higher education is high**: the education attainment of 20% of the American adult population over 25 years is described as "some college, no degree", which means that these people dropped out of college after a few years without completing their studies. In contrast, about **33% of all American adults possess at least a Bachelor's degree or higher university qualification**.

13.2. Types of higher educational institutions

The two basic types of American higher educational institutions are **colleges** and **universities**. The term 'college' means something very different from its meaning in

Britain, where colleges are typically autonomous units within a larger university (e.g. Balliol College within Oxford University or Trinity College within Cambridge University). In the US, a college is a higher educational institution which provides a **Bachelor's degree** to its graduates. Colleges typically cannot issue higher degrees; issuing **Master's degrees** and **doctorates (PhD)** is the privilege of universities. So, the American meaning of 'college' is the best equivalent of the traditional Hungarian concept of *főiskola*.

In American English, the term '**college**' has two meanings. Used **in the general sense, it stands for all higher education institutions, including universities**. When an American asks you "Have you ever studied in college?", it would be an entirely wrong answer to say "No, I studied at a university", because universities are also implied in the question. Similarly, the term "college degree" may refer to any degree earned in higher education. But used **in a specific sense, 'college' refers to those institutions that award Bachelor's degrees to their graduates, but usually cannot issue Master's degrees or doctorates**. A standard college usually takes four years to complete, but there are several other types of colleges (e.g. junior college, community college etc.) which can be finished sooner in return for a lower kind of degree (called associate degree): they usually offer vocational and practical career courses to adult students, often in a part-time format in the evenings or weekends.

Beloit College, a private liberal arts college in Wisconsin (photo by Károly Pintér)

Education at universities is normally divided into two levels or cycles: the **undergraduate level** (which might even be called a 'college' within the university, e.g. Harvard College within Harvard University) and the graduate schools. On the undergraduate level, curricula are similar to those of four-year colleges, and students finish their studies with a Bachelor's degree. **Graduate schools** are those units of a university that **offer specialized and high-quality education to students who have completed a first degree (usually a Bachelor's Degree) in an undergraduate course**. Graduate schools may offer **Master's Degrees** or **PhDs (doctorates)**. It is common practice among American students to

move from one institution to another when they have received their first degree and do their graduate studies at a different university (if they have received their first degree in a college, they have no choice but to start graduate studies somewhere else). There are certain professions that can only be studied on the graduate level, for instance medicine or law. The graduate schools of a larger university are usually called **medical schools**, **law schools**, **business schools**, etc.

Since World War II, the education system in the United States has been greatly enlarged, educating an ever greater proportion of the population. Much of this expansion took place in higher education. While only about 6 percent of the adult American population above 25 years had college degrees in 1950, Census 2000 found that 24 percent of adults possessed college degrees, and this proportion has since increased even more (see above in ch 13.1). As the population of the US increased tremendously in the 20th century, the higher proportion corresponds to even larger numbers: nowadays, about 74 million Americans possess a higher education degree, whereas those who have not finished high school are below 26 million.

The high dropout rate in college may have several causes. Colleges certainly set tougher academic requirements for their students than most high schools; those students who cannot live up to the challenge may soon lose their enthusiasm and give up. Many colleges and universities have a minimum requirement in terms of GPA: those who keep getting poor grades will be forced to leave before graduation. Another common cause of dropping out is money; studying in college is a very expensive thing, since students or their families need to pay five-digit tuition fees each year while also covering the normal costs of living (accommodation, food, clothing, etc.). This is a considerable burden even on wealthy middle-class families; many of them start saving money for their kid's college tuition right after birth. According to the most recent survey of the Census Bureau, more than 40% of all full-time college students and over 80% of part-time students had at least a part-time job in 2018 in order to finance their studies, and 27% of full-timers and 70% of part-timers worked more than 20 hours a week. The much higher proportion of working part-time students is no surprise since part-time college students are typically people of modest income who cannot afford full-time college tuition, that's why they choose to attend two-year institutions (community colleges or junior colleges) part time, which are much cheaper and offer evening and weekend courses.

There are two types of colleges and universities as far as tuition fees are concerned: the so-called public and private institutions. **Public colleges and universities** are not to

be confused with the public schools in general education. These institutions **were founded and are maintained by a state or a city** (occasionally by the federal government, as in the case of US military academies): as a result, they are willing to **accept in-state or local students at a reduced price, but not free of charge**. Perhaps the most famous public university internationally is the **University of California**, which consists of ten different campuses all over the state, including the world-famous UC Berkeley near San Francisco (founded 1868), and UCLA in Los Angeles. Under California law, the top 12.5% of graduating high school seniors have a guaranteed place at one of the UC campuses, and they pay far less than students coming from outside California. For instance, the annual tuition fee at Berkeley in the 2019-2020 academic year is $14,254 for undergraduate Californians, but $44,000 for non-residents (and this does not include any board or accommodation)! The average tuition of four-year public institutions nationwide for in-state students was about $9,200 in the 2018/2019 academic year – and this is almost three times as much as twenty years earlier, which shows how steeply tuition rates have increased in the early 21st century. Public universities typically have city-sized campuses and a huge undergraduate student body: the largest campuses (e.g. University of Central Florida, Texas A&M University, Ohio State University, or Georgia State University) educate more than 50,000 students each!

View of the campus of UC Berkeley, a public university near San Francisco (photo by Károly Pintér)

Private colleges and universities share one common feature: they **were founded and are maintained by private individuals or organizations**, without the involvement of any governmental entity. Apart from that, private higher educational institutions can be divided into several different categories. Almost all the oldest and most prestigious universities are private, including the **Ivy League**[119] universities on the East Coast, which include some of the best universities in the world, for instance Harvard, Yale, Columbia, and Princeton Universities. but there are some other famous private universities in the country like Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland, Duke University in North Carolina, or Stanford University in California. These schools were typically founded by one or more wealthy benefactors as a corporate foundation, and are governed by a board of trustees, similarly to a private company. A special version of these private schools are the so-called **liberal arts colleges**, which have a relatively small student body (below 5,000), therefore they can offer smaller classes and closer association with professors than large universities. They typically teach humanities, natural and social sciences, and arts, as opposed to more profession-oriented courses (e.g. business, law, medicine, engineering, etc.). Many other private higher educational institutions were founded by religious denominations, and they always include a school of theology or divinity. All the major Protestant churches have a number of colleges and several universities all over the country. The most famous Catholic universities in the US are the University of Notre Dame in Indiana, and Georgetown University in Washington D.C.

Private colleges and universities typically charge a higher tuition fee, since they have to finance their operation without the help of the state or federal governments. Their average annual tuition fee was $31,875 in 2018-19 (without board and accommodation); this figure had also more than doubled since 1999. The steep rise of tuition fees is a cause for great concern among students, parents, and politicians alike. **Student loans** have long been available in the US, with conditions similar to Hungary. Students may receive it from the federal government or from private banks, and they do not have to pay anything back

[119] *Ivy League*: A nickname for a group of very old and prestigious private universities which are all located on the East Coast between New England and Pennsylvania. The name originates from the idea that old university buildings are typically covered with ivy, and that is how these institutions named their own athletic conference. There are eight members of the group: Brown University (Providence, Rhode Island), Columbia University (New York City), Cornell University (Ithaca, New York), Dartmouth College (Hanover, New Hampshire), Harvard University, (Cambridge, Massachusetts), the University of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia), Princeton University (Princeton, New Jersey), and Yale University (New Haven, Connecticut). All but one of them (Cornell) were founded in the colonial period of American history, and they have a strong reputation of academic excellence but also of being selective and elitist.

until 6 to 12 months after they graduated and started working in a full-time job. Federal student loans are usually more favorable (lower interest rates, no interest until graduation, etc.), and they are guaranteed by the federal government (so if the student does not pay it back, the federal government will pay instead), but they impose a maximum limit on the annual amount, just like in Hungary. Private loans offer more money on higher interest. Students who study the longest, especially medical and law students, may pile up as much as $100,000 or more in debt by the time they start making money and paying off the debts. Besides the financial burdens of starting a family and buying a home, college debts can make the start of an independent career very difficult.

View of the campus of Texas Christian University, Forth Worth, Texas (photo by Károly Pintér)

13.3. Entry to a College

In American higher education, a formal entrance exam to colleges or universities never existed. Since there is no national system of education, students coming from various states and schools display huge differences in their range of knowledge and level of preparation. Therefore, a uniform test on history, physics or any other subject would not evaluate students fairly. The institutions select their students on the basis of written applications, in which they are required to submit a large amount of information about themselves. College officials examine applicants' high school grades, their outstanding

achievements in any field (e.g. in academic competitions, sports or arts), read their essays in which they describe why they want to come to that particular institution. **Racial quotas** have been ruled unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in the 1970s, so no college or university may set aside a fixed number of places for any racial or ethnic minority, but race can be a "factor" in the admission process, and most colleges and universities consciously attempt to have a more diverse student body, including more non-white and disadvantaged students. Each college or university decides individually which students they wish to offer a place, therefore students have to apply separately to each institution, and they may receive one, two, five or a dozen offers depending on how many places they applied to and how attractive they have proved to be. Neither the states nor the federal government play any role in college admission.

Since World War II, **standardized entry tests** have played an increasing role in the selection of students. The two most widespread tests are **SAT** (formerly standing for Scholastic Aptitude Test) and **ACT** (formerly standing for American College Test). Neither of these tests are prepared by the Department of Education or any other government agency: both tests are developed by private organizations, and colleges and universities are free to decide which test they require from their applicants.

Although SAT and ACT are slightly different, both focus on evaluating basic skills of students rather than their knowledge of facts. The SAT Reasoning Test (formerly called SAT I) currently consists of critical reading, writing, and math sections. In the first, students are given passages to read and then they should answer questions about them; in the second, they have to compose a short essay on a given topic; in the third, they have to solve high-school math problems by selecting the correct answer out of five options. Results are expressed in a score: at SAT, 2400 is the best possible score. SAT also offers so-called Subject Tests (formerly called SAT II), which ask multiple-choice questions on a certain subject and thus resemble a Hungarian *érettségi* exam more closely. Such subject tests are available in English literature, US and world history, biology, chemistry, physics, advanced math, and foreign languages. The majority of colleges and universities, however, only require SAT Reasoning Tests. ACT includes a Science Reasoning section besides reading, writing, and math, and its math section is supposed to be slightly more difficult than SAT. The best possible score at ACT is 36. Although SAT was formerly more popular on the two coasts, and ACT in the Midwest and the South, nowadays most institutions accept any of the two tests.

When American students apply to a college or university, they do not have to specify a subject or, in American English, a '**major**' they wish to study at the institution. Most college students start as 'undeclared majors', meaning that they still have not decided what they want to focus on. This is in sharp contrast with the practice of European higher education, where students are expected to choose their subject already at the time of application. The American approach is different for several reasons. Americans believe that colleges should give students a chance to try their hand at different courses and make up their mind afterwards, on the basis of their personal experiences, rather than choosing a major in advance based on little information or incorrect ideas. Students may wander among majors and satisfy their curiosity for as long as two years. Also, colleges want to provide a smooth transition from high school, therefore education in a college at first is not radically different from a high school. Students still study a wide range of subjects; all students have to complete some math, some English, some academic writing and other general courses, regardless of which major they choose. Choosing a major simply means that they begin to focus on a specific area and pick more courses from there, but as much as 30% of their credits comes from courses unrelated to their major. Another, rarely stated reason behind the American system is the relatively low level of factual knowledge provided by most American high schools. Many American colleges are forced to teach general subjects to their students in order to bring them to a level necessary for the successful completion of college studies.

13.4. Courses and Degrees

The standard college takes four years to complete. Academic[120] years are divided into two **semesters**, similarly to Hungary, rather than three terms, as in Britain. Students in each year have their name: first-year students are called **freshmen** or **fresher** (the latter is the gender-neutral version of the old term), second-year students are **sophomores**, third-year students are **juniors** and students in their fourth and usually final year are called **seniors** (The same terms are often applied to students in four-year high schools too). Students are expected to declare their major by the end of their second year. Double

[120] *academic*: In American English, the adjective 'academic' simply means 'related to higher education' or 'related to learning' (e.g. 'academic achievement', 'academic skills' etc), while as a noun, 'academic' means a professor in higher education. Neither word has anything to do with any academy as an institution, and a national academy of science does not even exist in the US, so they are no equivalents to Hungarian words "akadémiai" és "akadémikus".

majors (still the expectation in Hungarian teacher training) are extremely rare; the more talented and ambitious students may choose and complete a **minor**, which is another study concentration, but students have to complete significantly fewer courses (e.g. half as many) to finish it. For instance, a student interested in French history might pursue a major in History and a minor in French; another one who wants to become a math teacher may choose Math as major with a minor in Education. Each course (including sports and non-academic subjects) is worth a certain number of **credit points**, and all credits are summed up when a degree is issued.

The workload is not excessively high: an average college student has about 4 to 6 courses in a semester, which is not too bad even if most college courses consist of two or three classes a week. Institutions usually set a minimum and a maximum limit on the number of courses allowed in any single semester. American college courses are more similar to the practical seminars (*szeminárium, gyakorlat*) than the lecture courses (*előadás*) of Hungarian higher education. There are about 15–30 people in a class, and although the professor does most of the talking, he or she regularly asks questions, invites students to give their opinion, sets individual or group assignments, etc. Students are often asked to give a presentation on a specific topic. There are at least two or three written tests at regular intervals during the semester, but the Hungarian 'examination period' (*vizsgaidőszak*) is completely unknown in US higher education: during the last week of the semester courses normally end with a final written test, and next week students go home (usually in mid-December and mid-May). Their grades are mailed to them by the university. A college program is finished when students have completed all the compulsory courses of their major plus collected the required amount of credit points from the electives and the general studies program (courses unrelated to their major). Writing a thesis or a dissertation is normally not a prerequisite for an undergraduate degree.

Commencement (graduation) ceremony at Notre Dame University, Indiana, with Vice President Mike Pence (photo by Károly Pintér)

College graduates receive a Bachelor's degree at the end of their studies. The two most common types of Bachelor's degree are **BA (Bachelor of Arts)** and **BS** or **BSc (Bachelor of Science)**. Students majoring in humanities (e.g. English, History, or Philosophy) or social sciences (e.g. Sociology, Political Science) receive a BA, while all other majors are usually awarded with a BSc (e.g. Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Architecture, Engineering, Nursing, etc.). But the division between the two types of degrees is not always so obvious: in some liberal arts colleges, only BAs are issued, regardless of what students are majoring in. At other places, a degree in journalism or education is considered a BS. There are also some specialized degrees, like BFA (Bachelor of Fine Arts) issued to students of art academies, or BM (Bachelor of Music) to students of music conservatories. It is also possible to receive a BE or BEd (Bachelor of Education) in some schools for those planning to become schoolteachers below high school level.

A college graduate who received his or her degree has two options: to find a job, or to apply to a university graduate school. Some people may work for a few years after college to collect some money, because graduate schools are always more expensive than undergraduate courses. If somebody completed their undergraduate studies at a university, they may choose to stay at the same place and apply to a graduate school there, but this is quite rare except for the best universities. The majority of undergraduates consider it useful to go to another place, to meet new professors, new approaches, a new academic environment, as well as getting to know another city or state. Some choose their graduate school specifically because a famous specialist of some field teaches there.

Graduate schools have more formalized entry requirements: they examine students' grades and choice of courses in college, the recommendations of undergraduate professors, and usually require a test in one or more appropriate subjects (e.g. in Advanced Math or Physics, or in English and History). Entry to the graduate schools of the most famous universities is very competitive and highly selective: for example, only about 5% of applicants were accepted by Harvard Medical School, and only 6% by Yale

Law School in 2005, and the figures rarely exceed 10% at any Ivy League graduate school. Of course, there are hundreds of other universities where admission is far less difficult.

A graduate program is very different from an undergraduate program, and more similar to a standard Hungarian university program. Graduate students are usually not required to study anything else except courses related to their chosen field. They may not have many courses in one semester, but the requirements are tougher than at the undergraduate level, and usually involve a lot more independent research work. Also, there are one or more comprehensive exams graduate students need to pass in order to continue or complete their studies.

Graduate studies may end with a Master's degree or a doctoral degree. A Master's program takes usually one or two years; besides course work, students are expected to submit a **Master's thesis** based on their independent research. The two standard degrees are **MA (Master of Arts)** and **MS or MSc (Master of Science)**, but due to the more specialized character of graduate programs, there are several more types of Master's degree available. Graduates of business schools receive an MBA (Master of Business Administration), there is MEng (Master of Engineering) for engineers, MEd (Master of Education) for those specializing on education, MDiv (Master of Divinity) for graduates of theological seminaries, and so on. There are some special Master's degrees that take considerably longer – three or four years – to complete, primarily law and medicine. The degree of medical graduates is called MD (Medicinae Doctor), and the first degree of law graduates is JD (Juris Doctor) – despite the Latin names, neither of these is a doctorate proper, i.e. they are not equivalents to a PhD qualification.

A doctoral program is usually a direct continuation of a Master's program, but takes several more years to finish (usually 5 to 8 years in all). The first two or three years of a doctoral program mostly consist of advanced courses and are completed by one or more exams. In some institutions, candidates receive a transitional title at the end of the first phase, like MPh (Master of Philosophy) or ABD (all but dissertation). After that, candidates spend several more years to complete an extensive research project (which may require work at other institutions or even abroad) and finally, submit and defend their **doctoral dissertation**. Doctoral studies are offered primarily to people who want to become college professors or pursue some advanced theoretical research in some field. Regardless of the chosen field, doctoral degrees are nearly always called **PhD (Philosophiae Doctor)** – this is received by a candidate in History as well as in Chemistry, Engineering or Medicine.

13.5. Life in College and University

Most American colleges and universities are located on so-called **campus**es, or college grounds. A campus is a large area owned by the college or the university, where the individual buildings are surrounded by a well-tended park. Even small colleges have several academic halls where lecture rooms, classrooms and staff rooms are located; one or more administrative buildings; science laboratories; a library building; a theater or auditorium for stage performances and music concerts; at least one self-service **cafeteria**, where hot and cold breakfast, lunch and dinner are all available; at least one outdoors stadium for football and baseball; at least one indoors sport center for basketball, volleyball and recreational activities; several residence halls (popularly called **dormitories** or simply **dorms**) with rooms for students; and some sort of student center, with a bookstore, coffee shops, and other facilities for students who want to hang out. Private colleges and universities almost always have one or more chapels on campus, too (public universities are forbidden to allow any church on campus, since they are financed by a state or city government, which must not support or discriminate in favor of any religious denominations).

The great advantage of the campus system is that everything is within walking distance, providing an ideal environment for studying, since students find all they need for their day-to-day life and work. Freshmen (first-year) students are usually required to live on campus, in one of the dorms, so that they can integrate into the college community as quickly as possible. Rooms in college dormitories are almost always for two people; Americans are convinced that the **roommate system** is an effective way to prevent the isolation of individual students. Older students are usually allowed to move off campus and rent their own room or apartment in town if they wish.

Two sororities on the campus of Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, Texas (photo by Károly Pintér)

In many American colleges and universities, students have the option to join one of the many student **fraternities** and **sororities**. These are nationwide organizations with chapters at individual schools, each named by two or three Greek letters, therefore they are collectively called the 'Greek system' or the 'Greeks'. Phi Beta Kappa Society, the oldest such organization, was founded in 1776 as a secret society to honor the most outstanding students at William and Mary College. Later on, other chapters of the society were founded at other universities, so it became a nationwide organization. The various fraternities (which can be all-male or mixed) and sororities (all-female) have different character and goals: some of them want to include the elite of the student body, others require charitable or social work from their members, yet others are primarily interested in socializing and friendship. Fraternities and sororities maintain houses on campus where their members live. Each society has a set of secret rituals modelled on Freemasonic tradition, e.g. initiation, passwords, handshakes, songs, and the like. The initiation rituals, the so-called **hazing**, have caused occasional scandals, because freshmen are sometimes forced to do degrading and dangerous things (e.g. ritual spanking by older students, performing meaningless tasks, eating and drinking huge amounts etc.), resulting in serious accidents.

Higher education was traditionally the privilege of middle- and upper-class white males in the United States until the mid-20th century. Most colleges and universities refused to accept women until the 20th century, whereas poor people, including blacks and other racial and ethnic minorities were effectively excluded by the high tuition fees. This situation has changed tremendously since the 1950s. Following the success of the civil rights movement, public colleges and universities were required by state government to stop segregationist admission policies, while private universities followed suit under pressure from the media and public opinion. Many institutions introduced **affirmative action** programs, actively trying to recruit more blacks, Hispanics, and women, and giving them **preferential treatment** over white male applicants with similar or even better grades and test points. Such programs, as well as increased assistance by the federal

government in the form of grants and subsidized student loans, significantly increased the proportion of women and non-white minorities among college graduates, but also led to controversial public debates and court cases. Many white males protested against the preferential treatment of minorities in admission, charging that it amounted to **reverse discrimination** against them. As a result, many such programs were reduced or terminated in the 1980s and 1990s, but the Supreme Court ultimately declared in 2003 that race may legally be considered a factor in admission as long as it is not employed in an automatic or mechanical way.

According to the most recent data of the Census Bureau from 2019, the differences between men and women in educational attainment have completely disappeared. In fact, a slightly higher proportion of women (34%) have college degrees than men (32%), and women have overtaken men in advanced degrees too (13% of women v. 12% of men possessed a Master's or doctorate among the adult population). **The education gap between people of different races still exists** though: despite decades of affirmative action programs, only about 23% of blacks and 18% of Hispanics have college degrees, as opposed to 37% of whites. At the other end of the scale stand the **Asians** who **have by far the best educational attainment among all the racial groups**: 56% (more than half!) of them have a college degree. In fact, Asians have been so successful in American higher education that some elite universities (e.g. Harvard) have made attempts to limit their proportion in their programs in the interest of "a diverse student body", in other words, to give more non-Asian students a chance to get in. Some unsuccessful Asian applicants have complained of race-based discrimination and recently a group of them even sued Harvard in federal court but lost their case.

The spectacular success of Asian Americans in higher education shows that educational achievements cannot be explained simply by poverty, discrimination or immigrant status; the cultural traditions of individual racial and ethnic groups (in this case, the ambition to excel and the motivation to work hard for such a goal) are also a key factor in success.

13.6. Key terms and concepts

academic year
ACT
affirmative action
BA (Bachelor of Arts)

Bachelor's degree
BS / BSc (Bachelor of Science)
business school
cafeteria
campus
college [*two meanings!*]
college degree
credit (point)
doctoral dissertation
doctorate / PhD
dormitory / dorm
dropout rate
fraternity / sorority
freshman / fresher
graduate school
hazing
Ivy League
junior
law school
liberal arts college
MA (Master of Arts)
major
Master's degree
Master's thesis
medical school
minor
MS / MSc (Master of Science)
preferential treatment
private college / university
public college / university
racial quota
reverse discrimination
roommate
SAT
scholarship
semester
senior
sophomore
standardized test
student loan
tuition (fee)
undergraduate level
university

14. Religion in the United States

14.1. Religions and churches in modern American society

In most western societies, the last one hundred years have been characterized by an increasing trend of **secularization**, which means that religion plays a far less influential role in social and cultural life than it used to. In Europe, a growing number of people describe themselves as **nonreligious**, **atheist** (denying the existence of God) or **agnostic** (uncertain about the existence of God). Far less people go to church every Sunday than 50 or especially 100 years ago, and many people declare that they practice their faith "in their own way," that is, outside any organized church. Education and marriage have long ceased to be the monopoly of churches, as most countries created the institution of secular marriage and secular public school system during the late 19th century. As a result, religion has lost its earlier strong influence over the moral education and world view of the young. Since divorce became legal and quite easy to obtain, the majority of marriages are no longer made "for life." Sexual habits and morality have been completely transformed: it is nowadays common that unmarried couples live together for years without marriage, and more and more children are born outside marriage too. Although the massive role of Christianity in the history and culture of Europe is undeniable, many people would protest against the simple description that European countries are 'Christian', arguing that this is discriminative against the millions of non-Christian or non-religious people who live in Europe today.

While such trends and developments have characterized American society too, **the US** on the whole **has remained far more religious than Europe**. European visitors are often surprised by the fact that even relatively small towns have a large number of churches representing a bewildering variety of faiths. Sunday morning is still church going time in America: the majority of people drive to church or **Sunday school** (school providing religious instruction) together with their families. Most bookstores have an entire section of religious books, mostly about the Christian way of life, and many of these publications sell in impressive numbers. Bibles continue to be the nation's best-selling books. There are billboards along the highway with religious messages; people display their faith with such bumper stickers as "Jesus Saves." American currency bears the

inscription “In God We Trust.” It is a common habit of politicians of both major parties to finish their public speeches with the phrase: “God Bless America.”

Allegedly the “Largest Crucifix in the Western Hemisphere” in rural west Texas (photo by Károly Pintér)

Such subjective impressions are supported by statistics. Although the Census Bureau is forbidden by law to ask questions about the religious affiliation of Americans, private research institutions do publish statistical surveys about the role of religion in the US. The Religious Landscape Study of 2014 found that less than one-fourth (23%) of respondents described themselves as ‘unaffiliated’ (not belonging to any church), but even 7% of the latter group said that “religion is important to them” (which is probably equivalent to believing in God “in their own way”). On the other hand, more than 76% of people who answered the questions identified themselves as believers, and more than 70% described themselves as Christian. The survey published the following categories and figures (their meaning will be explained below):

Christian		**71%**
	Evangelical Protestant	25%
	Mainline Protestant	15%
	Black Protestant	6.5%
	Catholic (incl. Latino Catholic)	21%
	Other Christian	3.3%
Non-Christian		**6%**
	Jewish	1.9%
	Muslim	0.9%
	Other faiths	3.2%
Unaffiliated (Nones)		**23%**
	Atheist	3%
	Agnostic	4%

	Nothing in particular (but religion important)	7%
	Nothing in particular (religion unimportant)	9%

As these figures show, almost half of Americans (about 46%) belong to one of the many **Protestant denominations**. (The term 'denomination' means a religious group or sect; it is used as an official synonym of 'church', which might mean a building as well as a distinct organization.) Their proportion was significantly higher in the past: half a century ago, an estimated two-thirds of the population was Protestant, and in the 19th century, Protestantism was even more dominant. One reason for the relative decline of Protestant influence is the high level of immigration into the US, since the majority of immigrants come from Catholic or non-Christian countries. They are divided into three broad categories in the survey: the meaning and the significance of these categories will be discussed in more detail below in subchapter 14.3.

Catholics currently constitute more than one-fifth of the American population, and their proportion has been growing since Hispanic immigration has become intensive. A significant minority of Catholics, on the other hand, also abandon their faith, which prevents the further growth of the church in the US. **Catholicism is** already **the largest single denomination in the US**, since Protestants belong to more than one hundred larger and smaller denominations.

After Protestants and Catholics, the third largest faith is **Judaism**, the religion of the Jews. Their proportion is currently below 2%, which represents a decline, partly because Jews no longer immigrate in large numbers to the US (as they did in the late 19th and early 20th centuries), and partly because secularization affects Jewish communities too, and today a large proportion (maybe the majority) of ethnic Jews do not practice their ancient faith. The great majority of Jews live in big cities and they tend to concentrate on the two coasts, especially in and around New York City and Los Angeles.

The general category "Other Christian" includes a large number of small groups. The most significant of them are **Eastern Orthodox churches** (the churches of the descendants of Eastern and Southern European immigrants, such as Russians, Serbs, Romanians, Greeks, Armenians etc.), whose origins go back to early Christianity, as well as recent independent Christian groups often founded in the US, such as the Latter-Day Saints (better known as the **Mormons**), who are concentrated in the state of Utah, Jehova's

Witnesses, and other diverse groups. The most numerous among them are the Mormons, who make up about 1.5% of the American population. The "Non-Christian" category include other world religions such as Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, but also recently created organizations such as Scientology.[121]

As the figures clearly show, American society is characterized by an unusual level of religious diversity. Even though Christians represent the overwhelming majority (over 70%), there is an enormous variety of churches and denominations, so no single religious group may claim to represent the dominant part in American society.

Sociologists usually emphasize the role of local **congregations** as cohesive social institutions: the average American family moves to a new place several times in their life, and their integration in the new environment is much assisted by the local church group. The churches also have a very important social role as they maintain schools, colleges, and hospitals, organize charity action to help the local poor, give aid to Third World countries, etc.

14.2. Religion and Public Life

Since the United States was already religiously diverse at the time of its foundation (although most of that diversity was represented by the large variety of Christian churches), one of the cornerstones of the independent United States is **freedom of religion**. The Religion Clauses of the First Amendment of the Constitution laid down two complementary rules. On the one hand, **Congress must not establish any church,**[122] which means that no church can be declared official and supported by the federal government with laws and money (as opposed to Great Britain). On the other hand, **Congress and the federal government must not discriminate against or**

[121] *Scientology*: One of the weirdest religious organizations in contemporary US. It was founded by a science fiction writer, L. Ron Hubbard, in the early 1950s, and is organized along similar lines as secret societies (e.g. Freemasons) in the past, by promising secret knowledge to its followers which would make them rich and successful. Scientology has been accused of shady dealings, for instance financially ruining some of its followers and harassing journalists and others who voiced critical opinions about the organization. It has been banned from certain European countries like Germany, but it is a legal organization in Hungary, having an impressive headquarters on Váci út.

[122] Hungarians often misunderstand the phrase "to establish a church": it is not to be confused with founding a religious organization. Establishing a church means in British English to give it official preferred status, which usually involves legal privileges and financial support. That is why the Church of England is traditionally called an "established church" in England.

persecute anybody for their religious faith. These rules have been later extended to all levels of government, including states, cities, and towns, and reinforced by a number of decisions by the Supreme Court.

Of course, this does not mean that Americans have always been tolerant with people of different faiths. In the second half of the 19th century, the Protestant majority of 'old Americans' were shocked to see the large number of Catholic and Jewish immigrants flocking into the country, and Anti-Catholicism and Anti-Semitism characterized large segments of the population. Similarly, followers of old and well-established churches watched suspiciously as new 'sects' were founded, often by a charismatic leader: for instance, Joseph Smith, founder of the Mormon church was lynched by an angry mob in 1844. But such negative sentiments never entered official government policy: authorities allowed each group to settle down, build their own churches, and follow their own faith as long as it did not conflict with state or federal laws (as it happened with the polygamy of Mormons, for instance). This long-standing tolerance of the American government attracted millions of people into the country over the years, many of which fled their homeland because they could not practice their religion freely and openly at home. The Massachusetts Puritans in the 17th century, the German Protestants of Pennsylvania in the 18th century, the Irish Catholics and the Jews in the 19th century, or Christians of all sorts from Communist countries in the 20th century were all driven by the same desire for freedom of religious practice.

Message of religious tolerance on the back of a truck (photo by Károly Pintér)

The fact that the Constitution forbade the government to prefer or discriminate against any church (this idea is called **separation of church and state**) has significantly influenced the relationship between religion and the government in the US. For example, there are no legal or official religious holidays in the US. Christmas and Easter are important religious holidays for the millions of American Christians, but they cannot be made official federal or state holidays, because that would amount to a preference for Christianity over non-Christian religions and so it would offend the First Amendment. (An interesting consequence of this religious neutrality is

that American greeting cards often carry the message "Happy Holidays!" or "Season's Greetings" instead of "Merry Christmas!" or "Happy Easter!") **Religious organizations are free from all taxation** because taxes could be used as a tool of political discrimination and pressure. On the other hand, **no level of government may provide any financial resources for religious purposes,** because that would also raise the suspicion that the city or the state government favors certain churches over others. As a result, denominations support themselves entirely from the donations of their followers and private business operations (e.g. publications, lease of property etc.). Donations are tax-deductable, but churches receive them directly from individuals, not from the government (so it is impossible for taxpayers to direct 1% of their taxes to a church, for example, as in Hungary). **Sectarian schools** do not receive any government money either; they maintain themselves from tuition fees and money provided by the church or its members (unlike in Hungary where the government finances sectarian schools as well). The separation of church and state is sometimes interpreted so strictly that it might appear funny for a European. For example, Supreme Court decisions forbade public schools (which are maintained from taxpayers' money) to allow religious instruction on their premises (even after school time is over), to say public prayers, even to display the Ten Commandments on classroom walls. In one case, even a Christmas display in December was declared unconstitutional by the Court, because it was placed inside the city hall (a local government building)!

Such severe restrictions look strange especially because religion has always pervaded American political life. Despite the stringent bans mentioned above, it is considered completely normal that the word 'God' appears on dollar bills, in the motto of the seal of the United States, or in the Pledge of Allegiance to the American flag, which is recited by millions of schoolkids every morning in public and private schools alike (for details, see ch. 2.4). During the **inauguration** ceremony, the new president takes his oath of office on the Bible, and the speakers on the occasion always include a minister who delivers a non-denominational benediction. Every session of Congress opens with a non-denominational prayer. Politicians frequently make reference to God and the Bible in their speeches. They do all this with a clear political purpose: in a society where so many people value faith in God and religion, politicians send a positive message about their own character and their purposes if they use religious language or religious metaphors. But they are expected not to display any bias in favor of a particular denomination or faith, and they usually do not emphasize their own personal religious preferences.

14.3. Protestantism

America's religious roots are predominantly Protestant. The first English settlers in Virginia were mostly **Anglican** (the established church at the time), while the earliest settlers of New England were **Puritans**, a minority Protestant sect in England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Puritans were radical reformers who criticized the Church of England for preserving many of the traditions and ceremonies of the hated Catholic church, and demanded strict religious discipline in private life too. They thought of themselves as God's chosen people, and believed that God had elected, or "predestined," only certain persons to be saved. Although nobody could be sure of salvation while on Earth, they viewed success and prosperity as an outward sign that God was pleased with them and counted them among the saved. Many people trace the American drive for success through hard work back to this Puritan, or Protestant, **work ethic**.

During the 18th and 19th centuries, Protestants of many denominations immigrated to from all over Europe, including Presbyterians from Scotland and Northern Ireland, Lutherans from Germany and Scandinavia, Baptists and Methodists from England, and members of various European Reformed Churches (among them Hungarian Calvinists). The followers of these churches often quarreled among themselves over theological and practical issues and split up, forming several similarly named denominations that are almost impossible to be distinguished from one another by the outsider. The term **Mainline Protestants** is usually applied to the denominations that are the descendants of these old Protestant churches but evolved in a theologically moderate direction (more about that below). The most important Mainline Protestant churches include:

- The **Congregationalists,** the denomination descended from the New England Puritans. In 1957 they united with other Reformed groups to form the United Church of Christ. Nowadays, they are a rather small group in the US.

- The **Episcopalians**, the American branch of the Anglican Communion (they adopted the name 'Episcopal Church' in the USA because the name 'Anglican' became unpopular after the US gained its independence from Britain). They have

a reputation for being a small but respectable church whose followers tend to be wealthy middle-class people on the East Coast.

- The **Lutherans**, the oldest branch of Protestantism, founded by Martin Luther in Germany in the early 16th century and brought to America by German and Scandinavian immigrants. The various Lutheran denominations together have a substantial number of followers, making Lutherans the third largest Protestant group in the country.

- The **Presbyterians**, a form of Calvinism originated from Scotland (where it is the "established church" to this day). They are also divided into a lot of different denominations.

- The **Baptists**, whose origin goes back to 17th century England, but the church grew really large from the 18th century in the USA. The Baptists are distinguished from other Protestant churches primarily by their belief that only adults should be baptized. **Baptists** of various denominations **constitute the largest Protestant group in the US**, having an estimated 47 million followers, over 16% of the total population, but the majority of those are evangelicals (see below). They are the dominant faith in the South, where they are organized in separate white and black congregations.

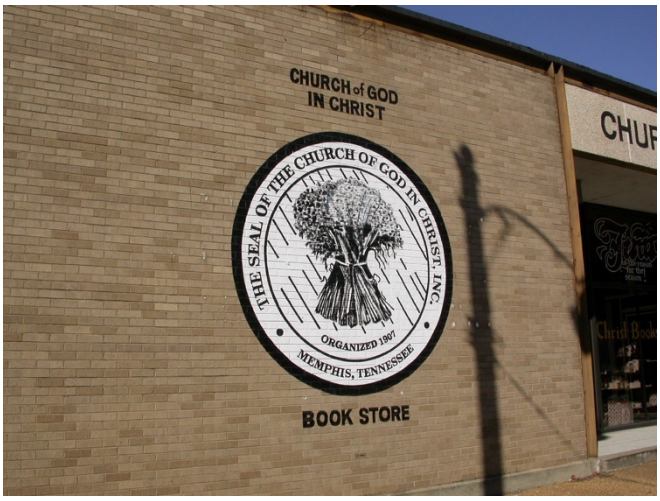
- The **Methodists**, another church of English origin, founded in the 18th century by John Wesley,[123] originally an Anglican clergyman, who experienced a spiritual conversion and began to preach the importance of personal faith and devotion. Methodists mix Anglican and Arminian doctrines in their theology, and are organized democratically around preachers and chapels. The various Methodist denominations together have about 20 million followers (6.8% of US population), making **Methodism the second largest Protestant group**.

[123] *John Wesley* (1703–1791): An English clergyman and theologian, who was ordained a priest in the Church of England in 1728 and spent nearly two years in the colony of Georgia between 1736 and 1738. After his return to England in 1738, he experienced an evangelical conversion and became an itinerant preacher, professing mostly Arminian doctrines like all people are capable of being saved by faith in Christ, not just those predestined or chosen (a major Calvinist doctrine), therefore he emphasized personal conversion, selfless devotion, and love for the needy in society. He appointed lay preachers and created small societies of similar-minded followers all over the country, but they were treated with suspicion by Anglican church authorities, so they were forced to build their own chapels. While Wesley never officially left the Church of England, his followers gradually evolved into the Methodist Church, which became particularly popular in Wales, Western and Northern England as well as in the United States.

Besides their long history, Mainline Protestants share other similarities, primarily in their moderate – critics would call it liberal – theologies. Mainline Protestant churches tend to emphasize the communal role of faith and give relatively little attention to doctrines. They believe that church doctrines should be adapted to social and historical changes but without abandoning the historical basis of Protestant Christianity. They tend to accept different and non-literal interpretations of the Bible, arguing that the biblical text should be read with its historical and cultural context in mind, and criticized by using man's God-given reason. They are open to similar-minded but historically different denominations; many of these mainline denominations established full communion with one another, accepting each other's ministers, theological degrees etc. Most of them accept women as ministers, and treat gays and lesbians with a certain degree of tolerance. The term 'mainline' was originally invented to suggest that these denominations together gave the majority, the 'norm' of Protestantism in the US. However, as the table above showed, this is no longer true: most Mainline Protestant churches are in decline and the number of their followers have been shrinking for decades, whereas Evangelical Protestant churches are growing, and have become the largest segment of American Protestantism.

The other major group of Protestant denominations is called **Evangelical Protestants**. The term might be misleading for Hungarians, since *evangélikus* in Hungarian is the name of the Hungarian Lutheran Church, a direct translation from the original German name (some of the Lutheran denominations in the US also call themselves 'Evangelical'). But in English, the adjective does not identify a specific Protestant group but rather a general attitude to Christian faith. The origin of the term goes back to the Greek *euangelion* ('good news'), the name of the four **Gospels** of the New Testament. So, the adjective 'Evangelical' was meant to emphasize that these Protestant groups wish to return to the original word of the Bible and build their faith and religious life on it. The idea has important theological consequences. **Evangelical churches are traditionalist or fundamentalist in their theologies,** refusing to give up or modify certain doctrines that are no longer considered unquestionable by mainline churches. These doctrines include the inerrancy of the Bible (the books of the Bible are inspired by God, therefore they cannot contain any errors, and the Bible is the ultimate authority in all questions of faith and moral life – for some, even in such scientific questions as the origin of life on Earth), the belief in the existence of heaven and hell, the expectation of Christ's Second Coming in the near future, and the necessity of a personal conversion of each Christian, a kind of spiritual rebirth with the help of Jesus (the so-called '**born again**' experience). Evangelicals also emphasize personal devotion (active participation

in church and community life), the spreading of the true faith among others (it is almost always understood as converting others to their version of Christianity), and representing Christian values and principles in public life. As a result of these convictions, Evangelical Christians tend to dislike Mainline Protestants (they call them 'liberal churches' and see them as groups who strayed from the 'true faith') and have little tolerance for groups who represent different or opposing views in religion or public life (e.g. Catholics, Jews, liberals, abortion advocates, LGBTQ people, etc.). Since the 1980s, Evangelical Protestants have become very active on the conservative side of American politics and nowadays they form the most reliable voting base of the Republican Party (see ch. 10.5 for details).



Building of a Pentecostal denomination of mostly African American followers in Memphis (photo by Károly Pintér)

Hardly any of the traditional Protestant groups listed above can be described as belonging entirely to Mainline Protestantism. Practically each of the traditional mainline groups have one or more splinter denominations that follow Evangelical theological ideas, so the dividing lines run not so much between different Protestant traditions, but between different denominations within the same tradition. For instance, the largest Baptist denomination, the Southern Baptist Convention, has a fundamentalist theological orientation, so the majority of Baptists should be considered Evangelical rather than Mainline. There are also many small and strongly fundamentalist Protestant denominations, such as the Mennonites and the Amish, whose origins go back to the German Anabaptists of the 16th century, or the Pentecostals, who believe that true conversion to Christianity may only occur with the help of the Holy Spirit, and its outward sign is **speaking in tongues**. Worship services of Evangelical churches are usually less formal and liturgical than services of Mainline Protestants, and their followers usually consist of lower-income groups. Both these factors, as well as the active missionary work in society and their simple and powerful message offering a solution to people struggling with personal problems, contribute to the rising popularity of Evangelical groups, usually at the expense of Mainline Protestants.

Since there is such a variety of Protestant churches in the US, it is difficult to characterize them as a group. One common feature is that they usually lack formal priesthood: **ministers** (who are addressed as **the Reverend** John Taylor, for example) are trained in schools of theology, but they are not considered a group of people with unique gifts (like priests in Catholic and Orthodox churches), only more learned and knowledgeable about Christian doctrine. They are allowed – in fact, expected – to be married and have children to set a positive moral example to their **congregation**s. Mainline Protestants accept both men and women as ministers, but conservative Evangelicals usually exclude women from the ministry. Most Protestants reject the visual representation of Christ inside the church as a form of **idolatry** forbidden by the Bible. Therefore, the visual appearance of Protestant churches is typically simple and undecorated, lacking the colorful frescoes, pictures and statues of Catholic and Orthodox churches, looking more like lecture halls than places of worship. Church services are usually informal, not having so strict liturgical rules as Catholic or Orthodox service: they almost always include singing of **psalms** or **gospels** (in this sense, the word means church music especially popular among Protestant blacks) as well as communal prayers, but Americans are not surprised, for example, if a member talks about their experience in a foreign country as part of the Sunday service.

14.4. Catholics

Catholics constitute the second largest religious group and the largest single church in the US. Their number and proportion has grown significantly in the early 20th and then in the late 20th century as a result of the large-scale immigration of various Catholic ethnic groups into the US.

The first Catholics in America were missionaries from Spain and France. In the 16th and 17th centuries, they set up churches in what is now Texas, New Mexico, California, and Florida. In the 17th century Catholics from England settled the colony of Maryland. But the greatest influx of Catholics to America occurred in the 19th century. Catholics emigrated to the United States from Ireland and Germany between 1840s and 1880s, and from Eastern and Southern Europe, especially from Italy and the territory of Poland, but also from Hungary and the territory of modern Czech Republic and Slovakia, between the 1890s and the 1920s. Until the early 20th century, however, American society remained

predominantly white Protestant. White Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASPs) set the basic character of national life and were often intolerant of Catholics despite the official government policy of the freedom of religious practice.

Mural depicting Christ on the main library of Notre Dame University, one of the largest Catholic universities in the US (photo by Károly Pintér)

The minority position of the Catholic church in the US has left its mark on the character and the social position of the church. Among 'old Americans' (earlier Protestant immigrants), Catholicism was considered a religion somehow alien from the American spirit and American values. The **Ku Klux Klan**, the infamous racist organization in the

South, whose original aim was the maintenance of the segregation and inferior position of blacks, also publicly incited hatred against Catholics and Jews. **The Catholic faith is still associated in the US with certain typical ethnic backgrounds: mostly Irish, Italian, Polish, or Hispanic.** These ethnic groups were typically poor and often discriminated or unofficially segregated by the Protestant majority, and their Catholicism was a central part of their communal identity. In the early 20th century, most American Catholics became the supporters of the Democratic Party, which was more sensitive to the needs of the poor than the Republicans. Also, American Catholics have traditionally been more liberal in social and cultural issues than Protestants, especially Evangelical Protestants: for instance, most Catholics opposed the Prohibition of alcoholic drinks in the 1920s, which has been described as the last outbreak of Puritanism in the US.

For most American Catholics it was a historic breakthrough when **John F. Kennedy** became the first Catholic to be elected President of the United States in 1960; his victory at the election symbolized the acceptance of Catholics as full and equal members of American society. Anti-Catholic bias among Protestants quickly declined afterwards, and it was considered an insignificant issue when Joe Biden in 2020 became the second Catholic President in American history.

The relatively liberal views of American Catholic church have caused occasional controversies with the Vatican, especially since the 1980s, because many American Catholics resent some of the official policies of the church. Opinion polls show that a significant proportion of American Catholics disagree with the church's opposition to birth control, while they would support such reforms as the marriage of priests or the ordination of women. Conservative Catholics, on the other hand, take a firmly conservative stance in the culture war issues of American public life, especially a **pro-life** position regarding legal abortion: it is hardly an accident that out of the six Catholic Justices currently sitting on the Supreme Court, five belong to the conservative wing.

In the early 2000s, the American church was severely shaken by a series of media revelations about the sexual abuse of young boys by priests. These cases happened in various places decades ago, but they were hushed up by church leaders, and the priests were allowed to stay in office, which dismayed members of the church, occasionally leading to dramatic fall in active membership and church attendance.

14.5. Jews

Jews constitute about 2 per cent of the US population. Many Jews came to America during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, mostly from Eastern Europe (the Russian Empire, Germany or Austria-Hungary) to escape persecution or simply to find better opportunities in a society where freedom of religion protected them from legal discrimination. Similarly to Catholics, Jews also often encountered hostility and prejudice, especially before World War II. Despite that, they became very successful in many areas of life, for example Jews of various origins played a crucial role in the development of the American movie industry.

Today, the largest concentration of Jews can be found in New York City, but also many Jews live in Southern California. The majority of American Jews have become more or less secularized: they either do not practice their faith any more, or belong to one of the many liberal denominations within Judaism, which makes few demands on followers. But orthodox Judaism is also present in the US. In fact, after the almost complete destruction of European orthodox Jewish communities by the Nazis, the US has the second largest concentration of orthodox Jews after Israel. **Yiddish**, originally a dialect of German and the language of Ashkenazi Jews living in Eastern Europe, is far more widely spoken today in the US than in Europe.

The **Holocaust** has dramatically changed the perception of Jews in the US. Anti-Semitism has practically disappeared from public life and politics, and, mostly under the influence of Jewish lobby organizations, the US became the strongest supporter and political ally of **Israel**.

14.6. Two curiosities: the Mormons and the Amish

There is a particular Christian religious group in the US whose origins are also American, and that is the **Mormon church**, or, in their official name, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS). They are not just another Protestant group, since they have developed a distinctive theology on their own, which disagrees with several basic tenets of traditional Christianity.

The church was founded by **Joseph Smith**, a young and uneducated man, who claimed that he had received revelations from the angel Moroni in 1823. The angel finally led him to find a set of buried golden plates in 1827, written by the prophet Mormon, which contained the history of certain Hebrew tribes: they sailed into North America before the birth of Christ and became the ancestors of American Indians. Smith allegedly translated the text with divine help and inspiration and published it as **the Book of Mormon** in 1830. He soon found a group of followers who called him a modern-day Prophet and venerated his 'inspired' translation of the Bible (in fact, an imaginative revision) and the Book of Mormon as sacred. Smith and his group wanted to found their own city first in various places in the Midwest, but they were received with suspicion and hostility due to their unorthodox religion, which included **polygamy** (having more than one wife). Finally, he was killed by an angry mob in an Illinois jail in 1844.

After his death, the group's leadership was taken over by Brigham Young, who decided to find a new home in the West. They managed to cross the Rockies and settled at the Great Salt Lake in present-day Utah. In this semi-desert area, under incredible hardships, they managed to establish a prosperous agricultural and mining community, but they were not admitted to the Union until they agreed to renounce polygamy in 1890 (although some Mormons are suspected of secretly practicing it).

Mormonism is still the predominant church in Utah, and they have some 3 million followers in the US, or about 1.5% of the population. The church is very rich, since each member is expected to donate one-tenth of its income to the church. The moral code of Mormons is strict: they are forbidden to smoke, to drink alcohol, coffee, or tea, expected to work hard and live virtuously. Each man is expected to spend a period of time abroad as a missionary, where they should work hard to spread their faith. As a result, Mormon missionaries can be regularly seen in their black suits, white shirts, and black ties on Hungarian city streets too.

The most distinctive (and in the eyes of some conservative Protestants, rather suspicious) feature of Mormons is their acceptance of the Book of Mormon and two other books as parts of the Holy Scripture. These books contain the letters, translations and revelations of Joseph Smith and other early prophets of the church. The church's current president is always considered God's Prophet, who is assisted by the so-called Apostles, or high-ranking church leaders. They believe in the Godhead instead of the Trinity. These features of Mormonism are unique, and not found in any other Christian denomination.

Another religious curiosity of the US is presented by the **Amish**, who trace their origins to the early phase of European reformation, when various Anabaptist groups sprang up in parts of Germany and Switzerland. These groups preached that only those adults should be baptized who can repent their sins and accept Jesus Christ, and they refused the baptism of infants. This was considered an atrocious heresy by both Catholics and other Protestants (Lutherans and Calvinists), therefore Anabaptists were persecuted everywhere in Europe. One of the splinter groups in the late 17th century, the followers of Jakob Amman, came to be called Amish, and **they decided to emigrate to the British colony of Pennsylvania in the early 18th century**, where they were promised free land and tolerance. Later immigrant groups settled further west, in the midwestern states of Ohio, Indiana, and Iowa.

Young Amish girls on a farm near Shipshewana, Indiana (photo by Károly Pintér)

The Amish are considered an oddity in modern American society primarily because they have largely preserved their communal values and their way of life from the first half of

the 19th century, before the arrival of various technological inventions modernized all aspects of everyday life. They live in small agricultural communities, and practice traditional agriculture using animals and hand tools instead of modern machines. Amish communities have strict moral rules, which are centered around the primary values of modesty and humility. Amish people dress in a simple, uniform way: men wear dark blue or black pants and white or light blue shirts as well as wide-brimmed straw hats, whereas women wear long, blue or grey dresses with bonnets on their head. The men are also easily recognizable by their long, round beards without moustaches. The children look like the miniature copies of their parents. They still speak an old dialect of German among themselves, but all Amish speak English as well. They are strong pacifists, who refuse to serve in the armed forces and generally try to avoid contact with the "outside world" as much as possible.

A typical Amish black buggy in Shipshewana, Indiana (photo by Károly Pintér)

Perhaps the most peculiar conviction of the Amish is that they refuse to use most inventions of modern industrial technology, including telephones, automobiles, electricity, not to mention computers. To their minds, it is another way of rejecting vanity and ostentatiousness. Amish people are easily recognizable on the road since they move about in small black buggies drawn by horses, and they also use bicycles.

Another interesting tradition of the Amish is that they allow their teenage children to move away from the community and discover the "wide world" for themselves. After this period of time, called "rumspringa" among the Amish, they have a choice: they can return home, get baptized, married and take on the responsibilities of the Amish community, or they may decide to live the way of "the English" (as the Amish refer to the wider American society). In that case, however, they have to suffer the consequences, because those who break the rules of the community are punished by "shunning": even the closest family members may not communicate with that person for the rest of their lives.

14.7. Key terms and concepts

agnostic
Amish
Anglican / Church of England
atheist
Baptist
Book of Mormon
born-again
Catholic / Catholicism
congregation
denomination
Eastern Orthodox
Episcopalian
establish a church
Evangelical Protestant
freedom of religion
fundamentalist
gospel (church music)
Gospel (New Testament book)
Hispanic
Holocaust
idolatry
inauguration
Irish
Israel
Italian
Jew
Judaist / Judaism
Ku Klux Klan
Lutheran
Mainline Protestant
Methodist
minister
Mormon (LDS)
nonreligious
Polish
polygamy
Presbyterian
pro-life
Protestant / Protestantism
psalm
Puritan
Reverend
sectarian school
secular
secularization
separation of church and state
Smith, Joseph
speaking in tongues
Sunday school
unaffiliated
Utah
Yiddish

Sources

A. Print sources

Bromhead, Peter. *Life in Modern America.* 3rd ed. Longman, 1988.

Caliendo, Stephen M. – McIlvain, Charlton D. (eds.). *The Routledge Companion to Race and Ethnicity.* Routledge, 2011.

Clark, Simon. "How White Supremacy Returned to Mainstream Politics." *Center for American Progress*, July 1, 2020. https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2020/07/01/482414/white-supremacy-returned-mainstream-politics/

Davis, Eliot. "States Where the Most Native Americans Live." U.S. News & World Report, May 21, 2021. https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/articles/2021-05-21/these-are-the-states-where-the-most-native-americans-live

Fiedler, Eckhard – Jansen, Reimer – Norman-Risch, Mil. *America in Close-Up.* Longman, 1990.

Gardella, Peter. *American Civil Religion: What Americans Hold Sacred.* Oxford University Press, 2014.

Kearny Datesman, Maryanne – Crandall, Joann –Kearny, Edward N. *The American Ways: An Introduction to American Culture.* Longman, 1997.

Kochhar, Rakesh – Cilluffo, Anthony. "Incomes of whites, blacks, Hispanics, and Asians in the US, 1970 and 2016." Pew Research Center, July 12, 2018. https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2018/07/12/incomes-of-whites-blacks-hispanics-and-asians-in-the-u-s-1970-and-2016/

Lehman, Paul R. *America's Race Problem: A Practical Guide to Understanding Race in America.* University Press of America, 2009.

Lloyd, Chrishana M. – Alvira-Hammond, Marta – Carlson, Julianna – Logan, Deja. "Family, Economic, and Geographic Characteristics of Black Families with Children." ChildTrends.org, March 5, 2021. https://www.childtrends.org/publications/family-economic-and-geographic-characteristics-of-black-families-with-children

Los Angeles Times Staff. "Five Misconceptions about the U.S.–Mexico border." *Los Angeles Times,* April 5, 2019. https://www.latimes.com/projects/la-na-us-mexico-border-misconceptions/

Mehren, Arthur T. von – Murray, Peter L. *Law in the United States.* 2nd ed. Cambridge University Press, 2007.

McDonald, Forrest – McDonald, Ellen Shapiro. “The Ethnic Origins of the American People, 1790.” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 37 (2), 1980, 181–199.

Prothero, Arianna. “Homeschooling: Requirements, Research, and Who Does It.” *EducationWeek*, January 10, 2018. https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/homeschooling-requirements-research-and-who-does-it/2018/01

Stevenson, Douglas K. *American Life and Institutions.* Ernst Klett Verlag, 1996.

Tiersky, Ethel – Tiersky, Martin. *The U.S.A. Customs and Institutions.* 4th ed. Longman, 2001.

Zelinsky, Wilbur. *The Cultural Geography of the United States.* Prentice Hall, 1973.

B. Online sources

https://www.census.gov/popclock/

https://www.distancecalculator.net/

https://www.visualcapitalist.com/u-s-share-of-global-economy-over-time/

https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/USA/united-states/fertility-rate

https://www.census.gov/library/publications/1793/dec/number-of-persons.html

https://www.census.gov/library/publications/1922/dec/vol-03-population.html

https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2011/dec/c2010br-02.pdf

https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2021/08/improved-race-ethnicity-measures-reveal-united-states-population-much-more-multiracial.html

https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2021/08/united-states-adult-population-grew-faster-than-nations-total-population-from-2010-to-2020.html

https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial/2020/data/redistricting-supplementary-tables/redistricting-supplementary-table-package.pdf

https://www.census.gov/library/visualizations/interactive/racial-and-ethnic-diversity-in-the-united-states-2010-and-2020-census.html

https://www.census.gov/library/visualizations/interactive/2020-population-and-housing-state-data.html

https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=foreign%20born%20population&tid=ACSST1Y2019.S0502

https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=educational%20attainment&tid=ACSST1Y2019.S1501

https://constitutioncenter.org/blog/on-this-day-in-1924-all-indians-made-united-states-citizens

https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/01/09/trends-in-income-and-wealth-inequality/

https://nij.ojp.gov/media/image/19511

https://www.statista.com/statistics/200476/us-poverty-rate-by-ethnic-group/

https://news.gallup.com/poll/15370/party-affiliation.aspx

https://www.edweek.org/leadership/education-statistics-facts-about-american-schools/2019/01

https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=Education&tid=ACSST1Y2019.S1501

https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/pdf/coe_ssa.pdf

https://admissions.berkeley.edu/cost

https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d19/tables/dt19_330.10.asp

https://www.pewforum.org/about-the-religious-landscape-study/