

## Chapter Four

### American Political Culture

# Political Culture

- **Political Culture:** A distinctive and patterned way of thinking about how political and economic life ought to be carried out
- For example, Americans generally believe more strongly in political than in economic equality

# American Political Values

- Liberty – rights
- Equality – equal vote; equal chance to participate and succeed
- Democracy – government is accountable to the people
- Civic duty – take community affairs seriously and become involved when possible
- Individual responsibility – individuals responsible for their own actions and well-being

# Questions About Political Culture

- How do we know people share these beliefs?
- How do we explain behavior inconsistent with these beliefs?
- Why is there so much political conflict in U.S. history?

# Beliefs About Economics

- Americans support free enterprise, but support some limits on marketplace freedom
- Americans believe in equality of opportunity but not equality of result
- Americans have a widely shared commitment to economic individualism

# American Political Culture

- Americans tend to assert their rights
- Emphasize individualism, competition, equality, following rules, treating others fairly but impersonally
- Some other countries put more emphasis on harmony and equality

# Table 4.3: Attitudes Toward Economic Equality in America and Europe

**Table 4.3** Attitudes toward Economic Equality in America and Europe

Statement	Percentage Agreeing				
	U.S.	Great Britain	Germany	Italy	France
It is government's responsibility to take care of the very poor who can't take care of themselves.	23%	62%	50%	66%	62%
Hard work guarantees success.	63	46	38	51	46
Government should <i>not</i> guarantee every citizen food and basic shelter.	34	9	13	14	10

Source: Adapted from *The Public Perspective* (November/December 1991): 5, 7. © *The Public Perspective*, a publication of the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut, Storrs. Reprinted with permission.

# Civic Duty and Competence

- **Civic duty:** a belief that one has an obligation to participate in civic and political affairs
- **Civic competence:** a belief that one can affect government policies



# Religion and Politics

- Religious beliefs have played an important role in American politics
- Both liberals and conservatives use the pulpit to promote political change
- Candidates for national office in most other contemporary democracies rarely mention religion; drastically different in the U.S.

# Sources of Political Culture

- American Revolution was essentially over liberty—asserting rights
- Widespread (not universal) participation permitted by Constitution
- Absence of an established national religion made religious diversity inevitable
- Family instills how we think about world and politics
- Not a high degree of class consciousness

# The Culture War

- The cultural clash in America is a battle over values
- The culture war differs from political disputes
- The culture conflict is animated by deep differences in people's beliefs about morality

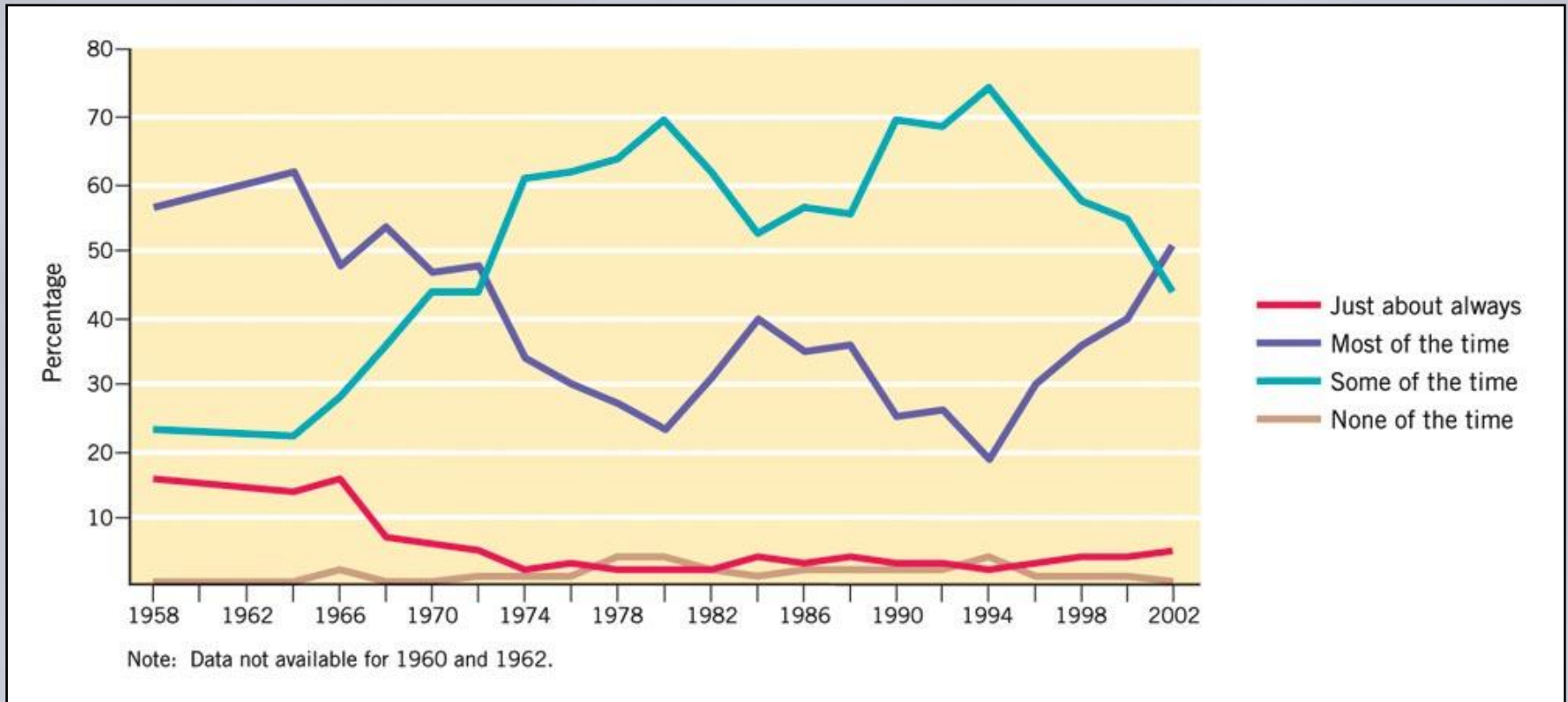
# Two Cultural “Camps”

- **Orthodox:** morality is as, or more, important than self-expression; morality derives from fixed rules from God
- **Progressive:** personal freedom is as, or more, important than tradition; rules change based on circumstances of modern life and individual preferences

# Mistrust of Government

- There is evidence that mistrust has increased since the late 1950s
- Causes: Watergate, the Vietnam War and Clinton impeachment
- Public confidence is likely to ebb and flow with circumstances
- No dramatic change in confidence in Americans

# Figure 4.1: Trust in the Federal Government, 1958-2002

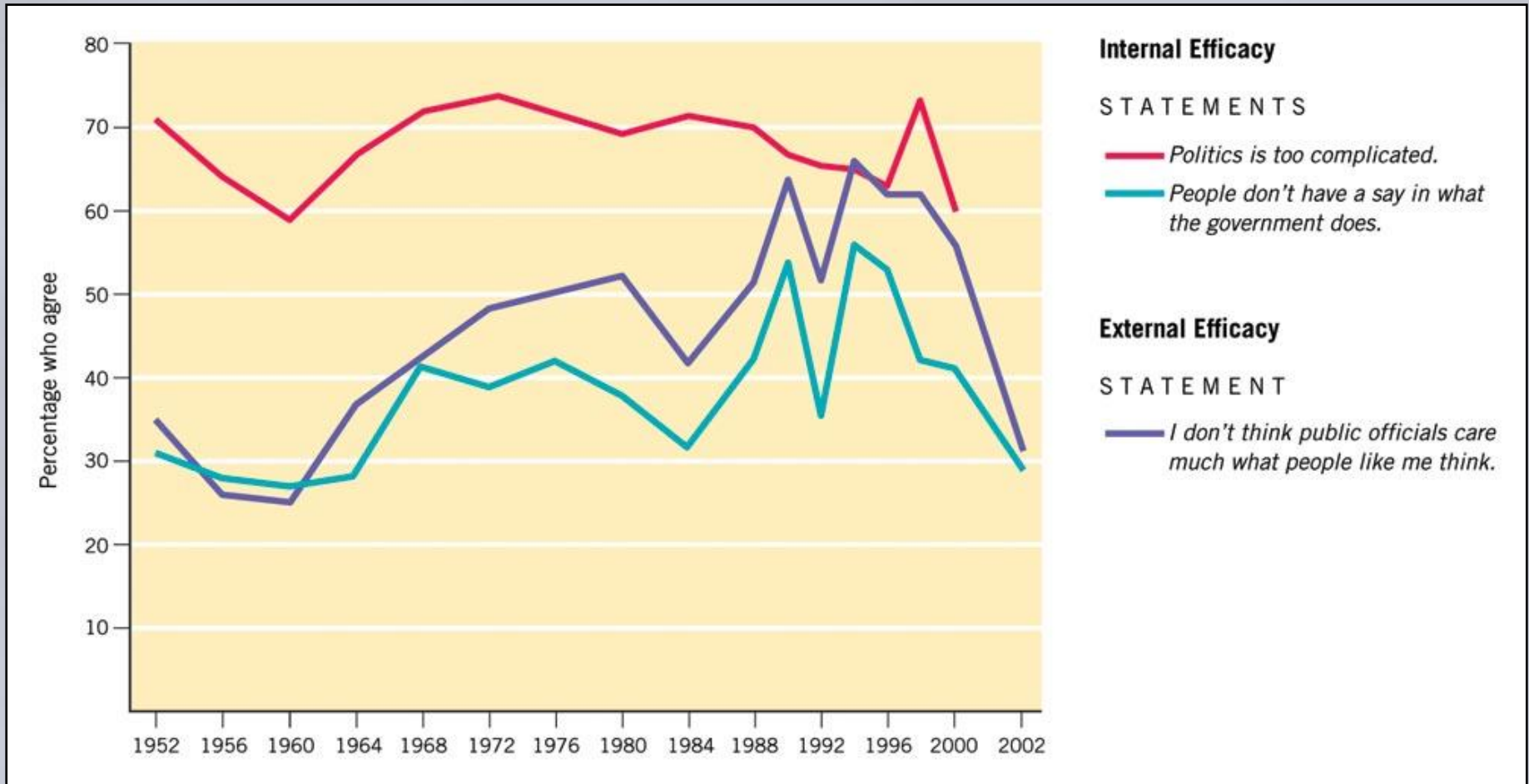


University of Michigan, *The National Election Studies*.

# Political Efficacy

- **Political efficacy:** citizen's capacity to understand and influence political events
- **Internal efficacy:** confidence in one's ability to understand and influence events
- **External efficacy:** belief that system will respond to citizens

# Figure 4.3: Changes in the Sense of Political Efficacy, 1952-2000



University of Michigan, *The National Election Studies*.



# Political Tolerance

- A minimal level of tolerance is crucial to democratic politics
- Most Americans support tolerance in the abstract
- Most Americans would deny these rights in specific cases

# How Very Unpopular Groups Survive

- Most people do not act on their beliefs
- Officeholders and activists are more tolerant than the general public
- Usually there is no consensus on whom to persecute
- Courts are sufficiently insulated from public opinion to enforce constitutional protections