



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

The United States stretches across the central portion of North America and includes Alaska, which is located in the far northwest and separated from the rest of the country by Canada, and the Hawaiian Islands, in the Pacific Ocean. Because of its size and location, the United States has a variety of geographical features and climates. Imposing mountains, vast deserts, wide canyons, extensive coasts, subtropical forests, wetlands, prairies, rolling hills, and tundra are all part of the country's natural diversity. Beyond the beaches and mountains of California, the Rocky Mountains, in the west, give way to a vast central plain, which merges with the rolling hills and low mountains of the east. Hawaii's rugged volcanic topography is lush and green year-round. Alaska has a varied landscape, with towering mountains, broad valleys, and glaciers. The country's natural resources include coal, copper, lead, uranium, bauxite, gold, silver, iron, petroleum, natural gas, and timber.

Climates throughout the country are as varied as the terrain, ranging from subtropical in southern regions to arctic in the north. East of the Mississippi River, the climate is generally more humid, while western areas are more arid. Natural disasters such as droughts, floods, earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, and severe winter storms affect various

regions.

History

Native Peoples and Colonization

North America's history before Europeans arrived is not completely known, but the original inhabitants came from diverse groups, many of which had advanced civilizations, extensive farming operations, and established trade routes. With the European explorers came foreign diseases, which killed much of the native population. From the 17th century on, Native Americans were displaced by European settlers, who came for riches, territory, and religious freedom. Between 1607 and 1730, 13 British colonies were established on the East Coast.

Independence

The American Revolution (1775–83) led to independence from Britain and a loose confederation of states. A constitution was created, which established a system of government, balanced the rights of the states and federal government, and protected free speech and other civil liberties. Explorers and pioneers headed west and settled large areas of land. The United States acquired territory from France, Mexico, Russia, and Spain throughout the 19th century, expanding its borders from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean.

Civil War

In 1861, civil war broke out between Union states in the north and Confederate states in the south over issues of states' rights, economics, and slavery. Under President Abraham Lincoln, Union forces were victorious in 1865. Slavery was abolished and the unity of the country was restored, although it took many years for the nation to heal from the conflict. Legal discrimination based on race continued until the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s prompted counterlegislation.

World Wars

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, immigration boomed, the economy grew substantially, and government policy focused on finding world markets. Initially wary of involvement in European affairs, the United States provided troops toward the conclusion of World War I, which ended in 1918. By 1942, the United States was a major combatant in World War II and emerged after the war as the strongest economic and military power in the world.

Cold War and Beyond

In the latter half of the 20th century, a state of political and military hostility referred to as the Cold War developed between the United States and the Soviet Union (USSR). This led the United States to become an important donor of financial, technological, and military aid to developing countries in an effort to engender allegiance and stop the spread of Soviet-sponsored communism. With the U.S. defeat in Vietnam in 1973, American influence abroad declined, although this trend reversed in the 1980s and 1990s. U.S. leadership was pivotal in the 1991 Gulf War as well as conflicts in Bosnia, Somalia, and Kosovo.

Twenty-First-Century Politics

Following the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, President George W. Bush declared a war on terror, which led to military action against Afghanistan (2001) and a controversial war in Iraq (2003); over time, both wars lost public support. Democratic candidate Barack Obama, who campaigned on ending the war in Iraq, won the presidency in 2008 and was reelected in 2012. In 2011, U.S. forces found and killed September 11th mastermind Osama bin Laden, and President Obama ended the war in Iraq. However, a few thousand U.S. troops were again sent to Iraq beginning in 2014 to aid in the fight against Islamic State militants. The combat mission in Afghanistan—the longest war in U.S. history—formally ended at the end of 2014, though several thousand U.S. troops remain in the country to train and assist.

The United States has faced many domestic challenges as well. The U.S. housing market crash and the subsequent failure of several U.S. financial institutions set off a larger global economic crisis in 2008. Government relief and stimulus programs helped lift the United States out of recession, though lingering effects from the recession lasted for years. In 2010, Democrats passed a highly contentious healthcare reform bill, which was strongly opposed by Republicans, who continue to fight against these reforms. In recent years, police shootings of black men have received increased scrutiny, bringing to the fore issues of income inequity, racial profiling, the treatment of minorities in the justice system, and the militarization of police within the United States. In November 2016, a contentious presidential

election, in which Donald Trump defeated Hillary Clinton, illustrated the nation's deep political divisions. Fighting the war on terror, promoting economic growth, and grappling with racial tensions continue to be major issues going forward.

Recent Events and Trends

- **Tax reform:** In December 2017, President Trump signed into law the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act, a tax reform bill that made numerous changes to the U.S. tax code, including permanently slashing the corporate tax rate and temporarily lowering the income tax rate for most individuals. The highly partisan bill was passed in the U.S. Congress mostly along party lines: most Republicans supported the measure and every Democrat opposed it. Supporters argued that the tax law would lessen the financial burden of tax payers and spur economic growth. Opponents, however, argued that the tax law would add to the national debt and disproportionately favor corporations and the wealthy.
- **Midterm elections:** In November 2018, national elections produced a split result that reflected the nation's vast political divide: Democrats won control of the House of Representatives for the first time since 2010, while Republicans strengthened their majority in the Senate. Voter turnout was estimated to be the highest for a midterm election in over 50 years. Major issues during the oftentimes divisive campaign season included health care, immigration, and the economy, but many political analysts saw the election as a referendum on President Trump.
- **Free-trade agreement:** In November 2018, the leaders of the United States, Canada, and Mexico signed a free-trade deal to revise the 24-year-old North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Dubbed the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA), the revamped pact includes key changes to rules governing areas such as agriculture, auto manufacturing, intellectual property, and labor rights. The USMCA must be approved by the legislatures of all three nations before taking effect. Although NAFTA increased trade among the three nations, many people in the United States believe that it helped accelerate the loss of manufacturing jobs.

THE PEOPLE

Population

The population of the United States is the third largest in the world, after China and India. A majority of the population is white. Hispanics (18 percent), also known as Latinos, are the largest minority group, followed by the black population (13 percent). Other groups include Asians and Pacific Islanders (6 percent) and Native Americans and Alaska natives (1 percent). About 3 percent of the population claims more than one race.

Although members of any ethnic group can be found anywhere in the country, populations vary by region. For example, the majority of the black population lives in the east and southeast, while the majority of Hispanics reside in the west and southwest. In Hawaii, roughly half of the people are Asians or Pacific Islanders. Minority populations also tend to

be concentrated in urban areas, where more than 80 percent of all Americans live. About 19 percent of the population is younger than 15 years of age.

Language

English, the predominant language, is spoken by most citizens. The English spoken in the United States is referred to in other English-speaking nations as American English. It is characterized by unique idioms as well as spelling and pronunciation variations from British English. Spoken English is very flexible, while written English is more formal and standardized. Many immigrants of the first, second, or even third generation also speak their native tongue. In fact, one in five Americans speaks a language other than English in the home, with Spanish being the primary language in the home for roughly 13 percent of all Americans. Native Americans speak a variety of languages.

Religion

Although the United States has never had an official state religion, about 77 percent of the population is affiliated with a religion. Most Americans (roughly 70 percent) are Christians. Early European settlers were primarily Christians, and the Constitution and Bill of Rights are based, in part, on Christian values and principles, but the American legal system dictates that church and state remain separate. Many different Christian churches are found throughout the country.

Roughly half of the population belongs to Protestant organizations. About 21 percent of the population is Roman Catholic. Other Christian denominations include the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and Jehovah's Witnesses. There are also substantial numbers of Jews (1.9 percent), Muslims (0.9 percent), Buddhists (0.7 percent), and members of other religions. About 23 percent has no religious affiliation but may still have spiritual convictions; the portion of religiously unaffiliated Americans has increased rapidly in recent years.

Roughly 36 percent of Americans attend religious services weekly. Religion is generally a personal matter for Americans, but some openly discuss their beliefs with others.

General Attitudes

Americans tend to be frank and outspoken. People voice their opinions and share their views on a variety of subjects; there are few subjects they will not discuss. Of course, there are exceptions, and religious values may keep some from discussing certain issues. Those who are not close friends avoid extremely personal questions. Many Americans enjoy a good sense of humor, including sarcasm. Most people have the ability to laugh at themselves as well as at others.

Americans tend to value innovation, independence, industry, and integrity. Although social classes exist, most people believe in social mobility that allows a person to move from one economic class to another. This opportunity for mobility is commonly called the "American Dream," which means work and personal ambition can lead people to accomplish more than their economic backgrounds might suggest they can. However, the "American Dream" includes the risk of failure. The wealthy can become poor, the poor can

remain poor, and some elderly people are not taken care of.

Even though Americans may criticize the government, most are patriotic and believe the United States is one of the greatest countries in the world. Many people in the United States consider their country to be a guardian of democracy and freedom. They strongly value their freedom and independence, as a nation and as individuals. Individualism is common. Even when working as a team, Americans usually think in terms of individuals blending their efforts rather than a group working as one unit.

Personal Appearance

Although fashion trends affect how people dress, Americans generally feel free to wear whatever they please, and many value comfort when selecting clothing. Some use clothing to make a social or personal statement, and many Americans express their individuality through their appearance. Jeans with T-shirts, button-down shirts, and sweaters are common among men and women. Women also wear leggings, skirts, and dresses. Shorts, tank tops, and similarly light-weight options are common in warmer climates. Both neutral and vibrant colors are popular. Women wear a variety of jewelry, and the amount of makeup used varies widely among women.

Americans emphasize cleanliness but may purposely wear tattered clothing or casual attire in public. Dining out or going to a movie theater is not necessarily a reason to dress up. Dressing "down" (casually) is a trend in the workplace; still, suits for men, and pantsuits, dresses, or skirts for women are standard attire in many offices. Formal clothing is worn for certain social occasions. Appearance, in general, is important to the individual American.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings

Both men and women usually smile and shake hands when greeting. The American handshake is usually firm. Good friends and relatives may embrace when they meet, especially after a long absence. In casual situations, people may wave rather than shake hands. Friends also wave to each other at a distance. Americans may greet strangers on the street by saying *Hi*, *Hello*, or *Good morning* (in Spanish, *Hola* or *Buenos días*), although they may pass without any greeting or eye contact. Among young people, casual verbal greetings or hand-slapping and fist-bumping gestures are common.

Except in formal situations, people who are acquainted generally address one another by given name. Combining a title (*Mr.*, *Ms.*, *Dr.*, for example) with a family name shows respect. When greeting someone for the first time, Americans commonly say *Nice to meet you*. A simple *Hello* or *Hi* is also common. Regional variations exist, such as *Howdy* (*Hi*) in some southern regions or *Aloha* (*Hello*) in Hawaii. Friends often greet each other with *How are you?* and respond *Fine*, *thanks*. Americans do not usually expect any further answer to the question; positive responses are usually expected, even if they do not reflect a person's actual feelings.

Gestures

Many Americans feel comfortable with more personal space than may be expected in other parts of the world; when conversing, most people generally stand about 2 feet (0.6 meters) away from each other. However, they may spontaneously touch one another on the arm or shoulder to show surprise, sympathy, or caring during a conversation. Close friends may hug when greeting. It is common for couples to hold hands or show romantic affection in public.

To point, a person extends the index finger. One beckons by waving all fingers (or the index finger) with the palm facing up. Direct eye contact is not necessary for the duration of a conversation, but moments of eye contact are essential to ensure one's sincerity. In informal settings, it is not impolite for people to prop their feet on chairs, sit with poor posture, place the ankle of one leg on the knee of the other, cross legs at the knee (more common for women), or—if one is wearing pants—to sit with legs spread apart. It is not uncommon for people to toss items to friends. Winking to children is a gesture of friendliness; when adults wink it usually means that they or someone else is joking.

Visiting

Many Americans enjoy socializing; they gather in small and large groups for nearly any occasion, and they enjoy talking, watching television or a movie, eating, and relaxing together. Although Americans are often informal, they generally are conscious of time. Appointments are expected to begin promptly. Guests invited to a home for dinner should arrive on time because the meal is often served first.

Hospitality takes many forms: a formal dinner served on fine dishes, an outdoor barbecue with paper plates, or a leisurely visit with beverages only or no refreshments at all. Hosts generally want guests to feel at ease, sit where they like, and enjoy themselves. It is not unusual for either guests or hosts to agree on a reasonable limit of time for the visit if schedules are pressing. Guests are not expected to bring gifts, but a small token such as wine or flowers might be appreciated. Hosts inviting close friends to dinner may ask them to bring a food item to be served with the meal.

Eating

Eating styles and habits vary among people of different backgrounds, but Americans generally eat with a fork in the hand with which they write. They use a knife for cutting and spreading, setting it down as they begin to eat. When a knife is used for cutting, the fork is switched to the other hand. People eat foods such as french fries, fried chicken, hamburgers, pizza, and tacos with the hands. They generally place napkins in the lap. Resting elbows on the table is often considered impolite.

After-dinner refreshments such as dessert or coffee are frequently served away from the dining table. Guests are expected to stay a while after the meal to visit with the hosts. In restaurants, the bill usually does not include a service charge; leaving a tip of at least 15 percent is customary.

LIFESTYLE

Family

Structure

The immediate family is the basic unit of society, but the composition of the average family has been changing. Traditionally, the average household consisted of a mother, father, and two or more children. Today, the number of married couples without children, single-parent households, same-sex couples, and unmarried couples is on the rise. Roughly 40 percent of all children are born out of wedlock. Americans vary widely in their attitudes toward these non-traditional households, though a majority of Americans now believe that it is morally acceptable to have children out of wedlock.

In recent years, the number of multigenerational households has grown to nearly 20 percent of the population; this trend is largely explained by an increase in young adults returning to live with their parents after college because they are struggling to find adequate employment and affordable housing and are marrying at later ages. Children may live with or be cared for by grandparents, especially if the parents are young and unmarried. Hispanic and Asian immigrants are more likely to live in extended family households than are white Americans. Whatever the structure, family is considered by most Americans to be the most important aspect of their lives. Many Americans also consider the family pet (usually a dog or cat) a member of the family.

Parents and Children

From a young age, children are taught to clean up after themselves as much as possible. As they grow older, they are often assigned household chores such as washing dishes, sweeping the floor, vacuuming, taking out the trash, folding clothes, and helping with yard work. Sometimes a small allowance will be tied to the completion of these chores.

Parents offer their children protection, guidance, and emotional and financial support but also encourage independence. Once children reach the age of 18 (the legal age of adulthood), many move away from home—sometimes to an apartment in the same city and sometimes much farther away—to pursue higher education, to seek employment opportunities, or simply to travel. Adult children who stay in or return to the parental home often contribute financially to the household if possible. Marriage is nearly always a reason for young Americans to establish their own homes if they have not done so already.

When adult children are financially established, they may help support their parents if needed. The rapidly expanding population of elderly people live in their own homes if they can; nearby children may assist them with chores, errands, and other tasks. When independent living becomes impossible, it is considered socially acceptable for children to move a parent to a retirement home, though the number of elderly who move in with an adult child is growing slightly.

Gender Roles

A generation ago, men were the traditional breadwinners. While that tradition is changing, the cultural expectation that a man should be able to provide for his family before marrying remains strong among many segments of the population. The recession that began in 2008 strained the finances of many households, causing stress on family

relationships. Today, more women than men achieve higher education, and about 56 percent of American women are employed. Women can be found working in any field but tend to more commonly hold jobs in the education, healthcare, and business sectors. However, they are typically underrepresented at the highest levels of corporations and government, and they earn less than men for equivalent work.

In homes where both the husband and wife work, men are now expected to share in childcare tasks and household chores, although as a whole women still spend about twice as much time as do men on domestic duties and child care. Working couples and single parents often rely on day-care facilities. In some families, fathers continue to fill the role of the primary disciplinarian and decision maker, while mothers handle daily household management and child-raising concerns; however, such roles are becoming more fluid among younger generations.

Housing

Suburban houses are usually one or two storeys and have three to five bedrooms on average. Houses are often surrounded by grass lawns and gardens. Things like trampolines, basketball hoops, and—among wealthier families—swimming pools provide entertainment. Houses located within city limits tend to be smaller, and apartment, condo, and townhouse living is common in urban areas.

Building materials tend to vary by region, with wood being common in earthquake-prone areas, adobe prevalent in the southwest, and brick and siding popular throughout the country. Energy-efficient materials and styles are growing in popularity. Many Americans enjoy adding on to and improving their homes.

Some Americans may move from one region of the country to another for education, employment, or a change in living conditions, though the majority of Americans are less mobile and are likely to live near family.

For nearly two-thirds of American families, the "American Dream" of owning a home is a reality. However, home ownership rates tend to be lower among minority populations. The cost of housing in both urban and rural areas has become increasingly unaffordable for many lower- and middle-income earners. High property and home prices in coastal regions make it hard for residents of even fairly high incomes to buy homes there. Wealthy Americans may own a vacation home in a scenic area or resort.

Dating and Marriage

Dating and Courtship

Dating is a social pastime. Some adolescents begin dating in couples as early as age 13, although group activities are more common at that age. More serious dating begins around age 15 or 16, when teenagers start driving. Going to movies, attending house parties, dancing, hanging out, playing sports or watching sporting events, and dining out are popular activities. Increasingly, teens and young adults meet, socialize, and plan activities on the internet. Casual sexual relationships are common. Among some immigrant groups and religiously conservative families, exclusive dating is more closely monitored and restricted.

Engagement

When a couple approaches engagement, they may shop for rings together or the man may do this shopping on his own. Boyfriends often surprise their girlfriends with the exact timing and nature of the proposal, which might take place at a nice restaurant or a place of significance to the couple. Engagements usually last between twelve and eighteen months (though they may be shorter or longer than this), depending on how much time is needed to save for the celebration and make wedding plans, which are typically coordinated by the bride.

Marriage in Society

Many couples choose to live together before or instead of marrying, and the overall marriage rate is declining. Still, many consider marriage to be the preferred living arrangement, and about half of American adults are married. On average, women get married in their late twenties and men closer to age 30. Those of higher socioeconomic standing are more likely to enter into marriage than are those with less education and lower incomes, in part because financial security is seen by most Americans as a prerequisite for marriage.

Common-law marriages are recognized by a minority of states, each of which has its own regulations regarding such relationships. Same-sex marriage has been legal nationwide since a 2015 Supreme Court decision ruled that state-level same-sex marriage bans were unconstitutional. Although same-sex marriage is controversial among some groups, the majority of U.S. Americans now support it. Divorce is common and widely accepted by society, though divorced women with children may find it slightly harder than divorced men to remarry.

Weddings

Weddings can be either lavish or simple, depending on factors including region, religious affiliation, and the family's economic status. Some couples choose to marry simply in a civil ceremony and celebrate with only close friends and family. Most, however, prefer traditional weddings, to which some 50 to 100 guests may be invited. The bride usually wears a white dress, and her bridesmaids typically wear coordinating outfits.

Such weddings are followed by a reception for family and friends that may include anything from a simple to a multicourse meal, alcohol, live or recorded music, and dancing. Receptions often last well into the night. Afterward, many couples travel within the United States or abroad, as finances permit, for a honeymoon. Traditionally, the bride's parents paid for most of the wedding expenses, but as the average age of marriage rises, more couples take on financial responsibility for the wedding themselves or split the bill with both sets of parents.

Life Cycle

Birth

Female friends and family members typically throw baby showers for women expecting their first babies. Showers include light food, games, and gifts related to infant care. Nearly all American women give birth in hospitals, attended by physicians or, in a minority of cases, midwives. One-third

of these deliveries are cesarean sections. Close family and friends usually visit the new baby and parents in the hospital, often bringing a small gift. Upon returning home, the mother is generally assisted by her mother or mother-in-law for a number of days or weeks. Throughout the first month of the baby's life, parents receive visitors, who bring gifts of money, clothes, or other items.

Parents who work at companies with at least 50 employees are legally entitled to 12 weeks of unpaid leave upon the birth or adoption of a child. Fathers rarely take more than a week off of work, while mothers typically take as much time off after birth as they can afford.

First names are often chosen based on individual taste; however, some parents may use a baby's first or middle name to honor a relative. Some parents may use more unique naming conventions. Among Christians, baptism is common, even when parents do not otherwise attend church. Jewish boys are often circumcised soon after birth as part of a *brit* (or *bris*) ceremony.

Milestones

The onset of puberty often coincides with an increased level of independence; parents may allow them a later curfew, for example. The 16th birthday (the "sweet 16") traditionally marked a girl's eligibility for courtship. A rough equivalent to the "sweet 16" among Hispanic communities is a girl's 15th birthday (commonly known as a *quinceañera*). Today, the 16th birthday is seen as important mainly as the age at which youth are eligible to obtain a driver's license. At this age, many teens are allowed to occasionally drive the family car, and some are even given their own vehicles. They may begin working part-time as well.

High school graduation at age 18 marks the beginning of the transition into adulthood. Many young adults begin living away from home at this age but may not be considered fully adult until they graduate from college and find a job. Eighteen is also the official voting age. The 21st birthday is a widely celebrated milestone, as it is the legal age required to drink and buy alcohol.

The traditional age of retirement is 65. Many Americans work toward the goal of being able to afford a comfortable, relaxing retirement in a pleasant environment.

Death

Burial traditions may vary by religious affiliation. Commonly, upon a death, the body of the deceased is transported to a funeral home. A viewing, attended by close friends and family, may be held the day before the funeral. The funeral is usually held in a church or funeral home and generally includes speakers talking about the life of the deceased, music, and a message given by a religious cleric, if applicable. A caravan of cars, led by a hearse that transports the immediate family and the coffin, then makes its way to the graveside, where another short service is held before the body is buried. Cremation is also common. A reception typically follows. People often bring condolence cards to the reception and make donations to the deceased's family or favorite charity.

Diet

Breakfast can be a traditional meal of eggs, bacon, and toast

but is more likely to consist of cold cereal, a piece of fruit, a pastry, or a cup of coffee. A sandwich accompanied by a fruit or vegetable and chips or another side is common cold-lunch fare, though many employed Americans go out to lunch during their midday breaks. Dinner consists of a wide variety of foods and tends to be the largest meal of the day. Meals that can be cooked quickly, including frozen prepared dishes, are common.

It is difficult to name a national dish. The abundance of fast-food restaurants in the United States would seem to indicate that the national foods are hamburgers, french fries, pizza, and chicken. While these foods are popular among most segments of the population, they reflect a busy lifestyle as much as preference. Many popular "American" foods are adopted from the national cuisines of immigrants; these include Mexican, Chinese, and Italian foods, as well as many others.

People in the United States eat beef, pork, chicken, and turkey in relatively large quantities. Fresh vegetables and fruits are available year-round. Many people also consume large amounts of "junk food," including potato chips, soda, candy, and ice cream. Chocolate chip cookies are a common treat. A growing segment of the population is health conscious and eats produce and meat that is organically grown and raised. Most Americans are open to trying new foods, and the culture easily adapts to new tastes.

Recreation

Sports

Basketball, American football, and baseball are the most popular U.S. sports. Professional sports are an important part of the culture, and competitions involving the National Football League (NFL), the National Basketball Association (NBA), and Major League Baseball (MLB) garner widespread media coverage and attention. Other popular spectator sports include auto racing (NASCAR), hockey, golf, tennis, and horse racing. Many Americans avidly follow collegiate sports as well.

Public schools and local organizations sponsor team sports for young people. The most common ones include football, basketball, track and field, soccer, and baseball. Rugby, tennis, swimming, and other sports may be offered as well. Cheerleading and dance teams are also found at high schools.

In densely populated urban areas, where open spaces are limited, the widest array of recreational options is open only to those who can afford membership at a club or recreation center. In some areas of the country, winter sports such as skiing, snowboarding, and ice-skating are popular. Rock climbing, hiking, and camping are particularly popular in the west, and surfing is common on the Pacific coast. Lacrosse, field hockey, and rowing (also called crew) are more typical of the east. Those in rural areas enjoy hunting and fishing. Running and cycling in amateur races is a popular activity. Americans also enjoy golf, bowling, racquetball, and aerobic exercise. A segment of the population participates in "extreme" sports, such as motocross, mountain biking, bungee jumping, sky diving, and the like.

Leisure

In their leisure time, many Americans enjoy consuming

media; they watch television and movies at home (often streamed on the internet) and watch newly released films in movie theaters. Dining out is another popular activity. Americans spend time online interacting with friends via social media, playing games, and surfing the web. Reading, gardening, and attending music concerts and cultural festivals are also common pastimes. Time is spent with family and friends over meals, while playing board and card games, and in nature. Single adults may meet after work to socialize, while families typically enjoy leisure time together on the weekends.

Vacation

Many Americans vacation once a year (or once every couple of years). The types of vacation vary widely with families' financial situations and may include a weekend trip to somewhere close to home, a road trip to visit friends or family in another state, a visit to an area of the country with a different climate or a tourist attraction, or trips abroad (the Caribbean and Europe are popular destinations). The average American receives two weeks of paid vacation a year, though vacation time typically increases with seniority. Students usually are out of school for several weeks during the summer. Many Americans take time off from work during the holiday season in December as well.

The Arts

Galleries and museums nationwide exhibit many art styles and mediums. Government and private organizations provide financial support to artists and art education programs. Larger cities usually have a professional orchestra and at least one theater. New York City is the center of fine arts production in the United States. Broadway musicals are quite popular, and the best tour the nation. The U.S. entertainment industry, including movies and music, is known worldwide. Computer animation and technology contribute to many movies' visual appeal.

Pop music is the most common form of music. However, rock and roll (of which there are several styles), jazz, blues, country, bluegrass, rap, and hip-hop all originated in the United States and have large followings. Realistic fiction is the most popular literary form in the country.

Holidays

Each state has its own public holidays, and each city may have local celebrations. National public holidays include New Year's Day (1 January), Martin Luther King Jr.'s Birthday (third Monday in January), Presidents' Day (third Monday in February), Memorial Day (last Monday in May), Independence Day (4 July), Labor Day (first Monday in September), Columbus Day (second Monday in October), Veterans Day (11 November), Thanksgiving (fourth Thursday in November), and Christmas (25 December). Although they are not official holidays, other observances include Groundhog Day (2 February), Valentine's Day (14 February), Saint Patrick's Day (17 March), Easter (March or April), Mother's Day (second Sunday in May), Father's Day (third Sunday in June), Flag Day (14 June), and Halloween (31 October).

Independence Day

The Fourth of July—the U.S. independence day—is marked with barbecues, picnics, festivals, and parades during the day. Many communities sponsor firework shows that night, and consumer fireworks are lit in many neighborhoods as well. The American flag may be displayed in front of houses for this holiday, and clothing and paper goods decorated with the flag are available.

Thanksgiving

For the majority of Americans, Thanksgiving marks the beginning of the festive holiday season, which concludes with New Year's Eve celebrations on the last day of the year. Preparations for the Thanksgiving meal often begin a day or two in advance. Family members travel what are sometimes lengthy distances to be with loved ones for this holiday.

On Thanksgiving morning, Americans may participate in American football games—dubbed “Turkey bowls”—with family and friends. The meal, which often calls for the nicest place settings a family owns, is generally served in the late afternoon. Traditional foods include turkey, mashed potatoes and gravy, stuffing, cranberry sauce, peas, and rolls, with pumpkin pie for dessert. Some families take turns listing things they are thankful for before or after the meal.

Christmas

A large number of Americans celebrate Christmas. While many Christians honor the holiday's religious significance, many people of all backgrounds celebrate Christmas in more secular ways. Preparations often begin the day after Thanksgiving, informally called Black Friday, when retailers kick off the Christmas shopping season with large sales.

Families put up evergreen Christmas trees—either artificial ones kept in storage or fresh ones purchased from local vendors—and decorate them according to individual taste. Stockings for the children and sometimes adults are hung (by the mantle if there is a fireplace). Evergreen boughs, red berries, poinsettias, candles, and ribbons make for common interior decorations, while house exteriors may be decorated with lights. Family members and friends purchase and wrap gifts for each other and place them under their Christmas trees. People may deliver sweets to neighbors and in some areas may even go caroling, though this is no longer common. Many children participate in musical holiday performances at school, write letters to Santa requesting certain gifts, and leave cookies out for him on Christmas Eve.

On Christmas morning, children find the gifts Santa has delivered and the family opens the presents they have exchanged. Extended families often gather for a large Christmas dinner that night, for which food similar to that eaten at Thanksgiving is served.

New Year's

On New Year's Eve, many people dine out in restaurants and attend parties—the most famous one being that held annually in New York City's Times Square, where the crowd counts backward from 10 as a large, sparkling ball travels down a pole, reaching the bottom at the stroke of midnight. Many Americans watch this televised event at home, counting down with the crowd. Traditionally, couples exchange a kiss at midnight and people blow noise makers. Children may be allowed to stay up late on this night. Many people start out the new year by reviewing the previous year and drafting a

list of goals for the year to come in the form of New Year's resolutions.

SOCIETY

Government

The United States is a democratic federal republic guided by a constitution. The president is both head of government and head of state. The U.S. president is elected by an electoral college, which represents the vote of the people in each state. Presidential elections are held every four years.

The bicameral legislature, called Congress, has two houses: the 435-seat House of Representatives, whose members serve two-year terms, and the 100-seat Senate, whose members serve six-year terms. Congress is dominated by the right-wing Republican and left-wing Democratic parties. Smaller parties are active throughout the country.

The government also has a separate judicial branch. The Supreme Court is the highest judicial authority. Its justices are appointed by the president and approved by the Senate.

Individual states hold sovereignty over their territory and have all rights that are not reserved by the federal government. Each state has its own legislature for enacting laws. Free elections have always determined the country's leadership, and citizens may vote at age 18.

Economy

The United States has the world's largest, most diverse, and most technically advanced economy. The country's economic strength is based on diversified industrial and service sectors, investments abroad, the dollar as a major world currency, a demand-driven consumer society, and exports. The service sector employs more people than manufacturing, but the United States remains a world leader in industry and high technology. It exports capital goods, cars, consumer goods, food, and machinery. It also exports pop culture (e.g., movies, music, television, fashion, sports), which fuels global demand for American goods.

The 2008 crisis in the housing and financial sectors resulted in widespread instability, which affected economies around the world, and a serious recession in the United States. Thanks in part to government relief and stimulus programs, the economy has improved, and unemployment levels have dropped. While American society as a whole is prosperous, there is a widening gap between the wealthy and the poor, and even between those who earn a comfortable income and those who struggle to meet basic needs. The currency is the U.S. dollar (USD).

Transportation and Communications

The United States has an extensive network of paved highways, and people use private cars to get around. In large cities, urban mass-transit systems are common. In many areas, however, public transportation systems are not well developed. Many people travel by air, and the United States has the largest number of private airline companies in the world. Passenger train travel is limited to short commuter distances and relatively few cross-country routes; trains more

frequently transport goods.

The communications network is extensive and modern. Almost all Americans have one or more television sets and cellular phones; in many households, cellular phones have replaced landlines. Most homes have cable or satellite television. There are thousands of radio and television stations in operation throughout the country; most are privately owned. Freedom of the press is guaranteed. Print newspapers are widely available but losing ground to other news sources such as television and the internet. The majority of Americans use the internet. Today, many companies are choosing to go paperless, performing all of their business electronically and online.

Education

Structure

Each state is responsible for its educational system, which leads to state-to-state differences. In general, education is compulsory from ages five through sixteen and free through the secondary level. Beginning at age three, some children attend preschool. Most preschools are private, though federally funded classes are available to those with incomes low enough to qualify. Students start elementary school at age five. Elementary school begins with kindergarten and continues through grades 4, 5 or 6. Middle school (grades 5/6–8) or junior high (grades 6/7–8/9) is followed by high school (grades 9/10–12).

Most children attend public schools, but a growing number attend private (often religious) schools or are taught at home. Charter schools are publicly funded but vary in emphasis and structure; well-performing schools that experience high demand may employ a lottery system to determine which students they will accept.

Access

More than 80 percent of all students graduate from high school, usually at age 17 or 18. Drop-out rates, which are highest among Hispanic students, followed by African Americans, have been falling.

As a whole, U.S. schools are adequately funded. However, because schools receive a large part of their budgets through property taxes from surrounding neighborhoods, those located in more affluent areas enjoy more resources than do their counterparts in lower-income areas. Schools in poor inner-city areas especially suffer from poor facilities and shortages in books, supplies, and computers.

School Life

Better-resourced schools with parents who are actively involved in their children's educations tend to offer more rigorous curriculum tracks aimed at preparing students for college. Aside from such classes, educational standards tend to cater to the lowest learning levels and—due to federal mandates—stress standardized testing. Teaching styles generally favor discussion, presentations, activities, collaboration, and individual assignments over lectures and rote memorization. Secondary students typically have one to two hours of homework a night. Cheating is not uncommon, though the practice is prohibited and may elicit serious punishment.

Important school-related social events include junior and

senior proms—formal dances attended by high school students. Teachers and students do not tend to socialize outside of the classroom, though teachers who contribute to extracurricular activities, such as band conductors or athletic coaches, develop more personal relationships with students.

Higher Education

The majority of students start college shortly after high school graduation, while others enter the labor force at that time. Technical schools, community colleges, and universities are all popular destinations. The United States boasts many of the most prestigious universities in the world, including the Ivy League schools of Harvard, Princeton, and Yale. These universities and others attract many international students. However, higher education has become increasingly unaffordable for much of the population, and many students take out loans to attend a college or university. Federal grants and loans are available for qualifying students. Although nearly all Americans can read, low-level literacy is a problem for some people.

Health

The health problems facing Americans are different from those in some other countries, in that the two greatest causes of adult health problems are a sedentary lifestyle and risky physical behavior, such as smoking and illegal drug use.

The United States is the only industrialized country in the world without a national (public) healthcare system. Because health care is expensive, most Americans rely on private health insurance to pay medical costs. Some people have been unable to afford or to purchase this insurance, but the 2010 Affordable Care Act has made health care more widely available, particularly to people with lower incomes or pre-existing conditions. However, many Americans are opposed to the law, in part because it has driven up the cost of some insurance premiums.

The health network is extensive and modern, except in some rural areas. Each state has its own regulations regarding health care, and there are some national standards as well. The United States is a world leader in medical research and training.

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information

U.S. Department of State, 2201 C Street NW, Washington, DC 20520; phone (202) 647-4000; web site www.state.gov.

Country and Development Data

Capital	Washington, D.C.
Population	326,625,791 (rank=3)
Area (sq. mi.)	3,794,099 (rank=3)
Area (sq. km.)	9,826,675
Human Development Index	10 of 188 countries
Gender Inequality Index	43 of 188 countries
GDP (PPP) per capita	\$59,500
Adult Literacy	99%
Infant Mortality	6 per 1,000 births
Life Expectancy	78 (male); 82 (female)
Currency	U.S. dollar

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