



*Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.*

## BACKGROUND

**Land and Climate.** The United States covers the central portion of North America and includes Alaska in the far northwest and the Hawaiian Islands in the Pacific Ocean. Covering 3,618,765 square miles (9,372,558 square kilometers), it is the fourth largest country in the world. 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, rolling hills, prairies, 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.

Climates throughout the country are as varied as the terrain. Natural resources include coal, copper, lead, uranium, bauxite, gold, silver, iron, petroleum, natural gas, timber, and much more. Natural disasters such as droughts, floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, and severe winter storms affect various regions.

**History.** North America's history before Europeans arrived is not completely known, but many of the original inhabitants had advanced civilizations. 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.

The American Revolution (1775–83) led to independence from Britain and a loose confederation of states. A constitution was created, which prescribed 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.

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 Union 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.

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 end of World War I, which ended in 1918. By 1942, it was a major combatant in World War II and emerged as the strongest economic and military power in the world.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, the United States became a major donor of financial, technological, and military

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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 seemed to reverse in the 1980s and 1990s. U.S. leadership was pivotal in the 1991 Gulf War as well as conflicts in Bosnia, Somalia, and Kosovo, and is currently vital to ongoing peace talks and negotiations around the world—especially in the Middle East.

In the 2000 presidential elections, George W. Bush was declared the winner over former Vice President Al Gore after numerous vote recounts and court decisions. Initially working to reduce the country's part in international disputes, Bush changed his approach after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. He declared a war on terror, which eventually led to military action against Afghanistan (2001) and a controversial war in Iraq (2003). A leader in the global economy and foremost among the world's military powers, the United States continues to have a far-reaching worldwide influence.

### THE PEOPLE

**Population.** The population of the United States (about 290 million) is the third largest in the world, following China and India, and is growing at a rate of 0.9 percent per year. A large portion of the population (69 percent) is white. Hispanics, also known as Latinos, (13.5 percent) are the fastest-growing minority group. They recently became the country's largest minority, surpassing the black population (13 percent). Other groups include Asians and Pacific Islanders (4 percent) and Native Americans (1 percent). About 2.4 percent of the population claimed more than one race.

Although members of any ethnic group can be found anywhere in the country, populations vary by region. For example, the black population lives mostly in the east and southeast, while Hispanics reside mostly in the west and southwest. In Hawaii, more than half of the people are Asians or Pacific Islanders. Minority populations also tend to be concentrated in urban areas. About one-fourth of the population is younger than 18 years of age, and nearly 80 percent of all Americans live in metropolitan areas.

**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 and spelling and pronunciation variations from British English. Spoken English is very flexible, while written English is more formal and standardized. Many first-, second-, or even third-generation immigrants also speak their native tongue. In fact, one in seven Americans speaks a language other than English in the home. Spanish is spoken in many communities. Native Americans speak a variety of languages.

**Religion.** Although the United States has never had an official state church, about 95 percent of the population professes some religious belief. Most Americans (80–85 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. However, the Constitution dictates that church and state remain separate. Many different Christian churches are found throughout the country. About 26 percent of the population is Roman Catholic. Baptists, Methodists, and Lutherans are the largest Protestant groups; as much as 55 percent of Americans belong to these or other Protestant organizations. Other Christian denominations account for another 3 to 5 percent of the total. There are also substantial

numbers of Jews (2 percent), Muslims, Buddhists, and other non-Christians. Between 40 and 45 percent of Americans attend religious services weekly. About 10 percent of all Americans have no religious affiliation but may still have spiritual convictions. 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. In general, they appreciate people who are candid. They 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. Americans value innovation, industry, and integrity. They enjoy a good sense of humor, including sarcasm. Most people have the ability to laugh at themselves as well as at others. Even though they may criticize the government, most citizens are patriotic and believe the United States is one of the greatest countries in the world. People in the United States consider their country to be a guardian of democracy and freedom and a promoter of peace worldwide. They strongly value their freedom and independence, as a nation and as individuals. Individualism, as opposed to conformity, is often cited as an American characteristic. Even when working as a team, Americans usually think in terms of several distinct 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. Some use clothing to make a social or personal statement. Americans emphasize cleanliness but may purposely wear tattered clothing or casual attire in public. 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 *Hello* or *Good morning* (in Spanish, *Hola* or *Buenos días*), although they may pass without any greeting. Among the youth, verbal greetings or hand-slapping 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 *Aloha* (Hello) in Hawaii. Friends often greet each other with *How are you?* and respond *Fine, thanks*. Americans do not really expect any further answer to the question.

**Gestures.** When conversing, Americans generally stand about 2 feet (.6 meters) away from each other. However, they may spontaneously touch one another on the arm or shoulder during conversation. Members of the opposite sex often hold hands or show 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 nec-

essary 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.** Although Americans are 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 no refreshments. 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. 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.

**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 15 percent is customary.

## LIFESTYLE

**Family.** The immediate family is the basic unit of society, but the composition of the average family has been changing. A generation ago, the average household consisted of a mother, father, and two or more children. This nuclear family often maintained important ties to members of the extended family. Today, only about one-fourth of all households consist of a mother, father, and one or two children. While another 29 percent of households are married couples with no children in the home, other family structures are becoming more common, including families with a single parent and unmarried couples with or without children. One-third of all children are born out of wedlock. Children may live with or be cared for by grandparents, especially if the parents are young and unmarried.

A generation ago, men were the traditional breadwinners. Today, nearly half of all working Americans are women. In homes where both the husband and wife work, men are now expected to share household chores, although women still perform most domestic duties. Men often play an important role in raising children as well. With both parents working, the use of day-care facilities is increasing. Single-parent families also rely heavily on day care. Elderly individuals who cannot care for themselves may live in retirement communities or other institutions, or they may live with their adult children. Other-

wise, the elderly live in their own homes and comprise a rapidly expanding segment of the population. More than half of all young, unmarried adults (ages 18–24) live with their parents. The American family is mobile. People frequently move from one region of the country to another for education, employment, or a change in living conditions.

**Dating and Marriage.** Dating is a social pastime. Youths may 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. Going to movies, dancing, having picnics, playing sports or watching sporting events, and dining out are popular activities. Casual sexual relationships are common. Many couples choose to live together before or instead of marrying. Still, many consider marriage to be the preferred living arrangement. Weddings can be either lavish or simple, depending on factors including region, religious affiliation, and the family's economic status. On average, men get married at age 27 and women at age 25.

**Diet.** 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, although eating habits have changed with health concerns. 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. Most Americans are open to trying new foods, and the culture easily adapts to new tastes.

**Recreation.** Basketball, American football, and baseball are the most popular U.S. sports. Public schools and local organizations sponsor team sports for young people. Professional sports are an important part of the culture. Americans also enjoy soccer, cycling, racquetball, hockey, tennis, swimming, golf, bowling, jogging, and aerobic exercise. Leisure activities include watching television, going to movies, reading, surfing the internet, spending time with friends, attending music concerts, and traveling.

**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. Broadway musicals are quite popular, and the best tour the nation. The U.S. entertainment industry, including movies and music, is known worldwide. Pop music is the most common form of music. However, several rock and roll styles, jazz, blues, country, and bluegrass 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, 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 Nov.), Thanksgiving (fourth Thursday in November), and Christmas. Although they are not official holidays, other observances include Groundhog Day (2 Feb.), Valentine's Day (14 Feb.),

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St. Patrick's Day (17 Mar.), Easter, Mother's Day (second Sunday in May), Father's Day (third Sunday in June), Flag Day (14 June), and Halloween (31 Oct.).

**Commerce.** Business office hours usually extend from 8 or 9 a.m. to 5 or 6 p.m. However, retail and grocery stores often remain open until 9 or 10 p.m., and many are open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Suburban Americans shop for groceries and other goods in supermarkets, large enclosed malls with department and specialty stores, smaller open-air strip malls that feature specialty shops, and chain discount stores. Urban residents shop in many of the same stores but might also buy goods at small neighborhood shops that are part of large office or apartment buildings.

## SOCIETY

**Government.** The United States is a democratic federal republic guided by a constitution. 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. The U.S. president (currently George W. Bush) 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 (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 Republican and Democratic Parties. Smaller parties are active throughout the country. The government also has a separate judicial branch. The U.S. Supreme Court is the highest judicial authority. Its justices are appointed by the president and approved by the Senate.

**Economy.** The United States has the world's largest, most diverse, and most technically advanced economy. 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 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 demand for American goods. The United States is a key world financial center, and its economic fortunes affect global markets and international economic growth. The currency is the U.S. dollar (USD).

**Transportation and Communications.** The United States has an extensive network of paved highways, and the private car is the chief form of transportation. 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

## DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	7 of 175 countries
Adjusted for women	5 of 144 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$34,320
Adult literacy rate	99 percent (male); 99 (female)
Infant mortality rate	7 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	74 (male); 80 (female)

cross-country routes; trains more frequently transport goods.

The communications network is extensive and modern. Almost all households have a telephone (and often a cellular phone) and one or more television sets. 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. Although newspapers are available everywhere, only about half of all Americans read one every day. Others watch television or use the internet for news. More than 70 million households have internet access.

**Education.** Each state is responsible for its educational system. Education is compulsory for ages five through sixteen and free through the secondary level. Most children attend public schools, but a growing number attend private schools or are schooled at home. Most students complete their high school education at grade 12 (at age 17 or 18). About 75 percent of high school graduates seek some higher learning in technical school or at a university, but many enter the labor force at that time. 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. The United States is the only industrialized country in the world without a national (public) health care system. Most people must have private insurance to receive medical care without paying very high prices. 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. Public and private reform movements are changing how health care is provided and paid for. The United States is a world leader in medical research and training.

## AT A GLANCE

### Events and Trends.

- The United States invaded Iraq in March 2003. The move was controversial among key members of the United Nations, and the occupation of Iraq has proven difficult.
- In February 2003, a seven-member crew was killed when space shuttle Columbia broke up while reentering Earth's atmosphere. First launched in 1981, Columbia was the oldest shuttle in NASA's space program.

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