

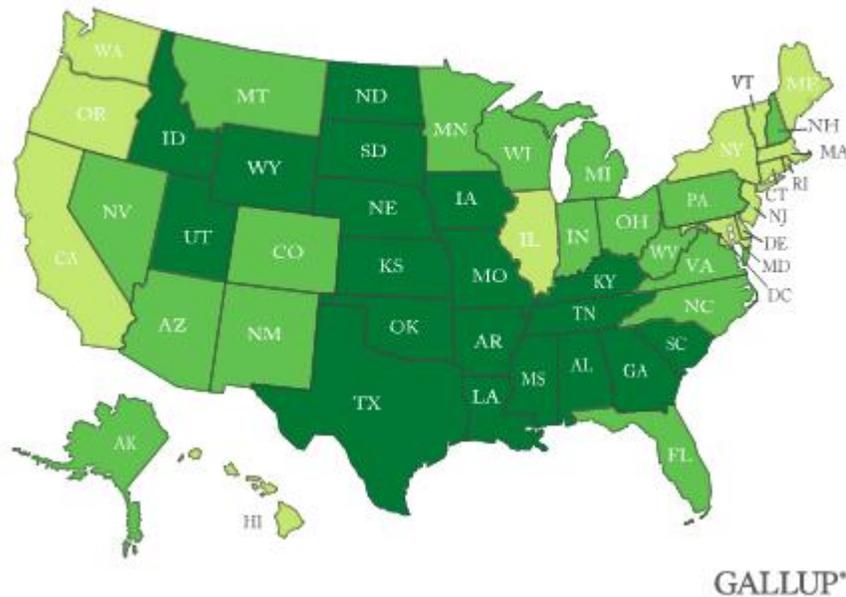
The (increasingly) Conservative States of America.

Richard Florida, the urban-affairs guru, has run the latest Gallup numbers on party affiliation, co-relating them with factors of income, religious observance, educational attainment, and has come up with some startling (to me) observations.

Yes, America is a more conservative culture than Canada or Europe, always has been. But, Florida, asserts, it is becoming more so. One could go about proving this, as Florida does. But for me it's sufficient to note the populist support of FDR during the Depression contrasted to the polarizing effect of Obama and his agenda, also during a time of severe economic distress. (One doesn't want to exaggerate Obama's unpopularity, notwithstanding the dismal the mid-term election results for Dems. Obama is polling about 15 points ahead of Ronald Reagan at the two-year mark in his presidency.)

Ideology: % Conservative

■ Above average ■ Average ■ Below average



Two Democratic presidents, coping with the two worst economic crises in modern U.S. history. One enjoyed popular support - indeed, was able to build an enduring coalition of blue-collar workers, African Americans, women, and first- and second-generation immigrants that set the national political agenda for a third of a century, from 1933 to 1968. Even Ike, father of the Interstate highway mega-project, was recognizably a New Dealer.

Faced with obvious crises - a global economic meltdown of U.S. origin (the unprecedented American housing boom-bust of the 2000s); urgently needed reform in education and healthcare systems that have fallen behind those of other advanced nations, jeopardizing America's future prosperity and global clout; and a global disdain for America which works against America's interests in everything from combatting terrorism to boosting U.S. exports to compensate for a flagging domestic economy; all these things Obama tackled in what most would regard as a competent, non-ideological and not radical manner, Hate Radio's view notwithstanding. Yet Obama has been thoroughly tagged as a radical socialist. And this is what progressives disappointed in Obama have to constantly bear in mind.

Why this increasingly sharp divergence occurring in today's America? FDR's reforms *were* radical for their time. They included collective bargaining (the Wagner Act); centralization of power in Washington at the expense of the states; the creation of today's welfare state, starting with Social Security; and harsh regulations imposed on Wall Street, including the creation of the SEC.\

By contrast, Obama can easily be seen as a "sell-out" to the monied establishment and malefactors of great wealth, as TR called them. Most recent example: Obama's pick to head one of his new economic advisory commissions is the CEO of General Electric, revealed to have paid no taxes last year on its \$5 billion in profits.

One thing the two crisis-era Dem presidents had in common: they each saved capitalism from itself. That capitalism needs periodically to be rescued says all that needs saying about the supposed unalloyed virtues of that system. And each president earned the odium of the wealthiest citizens for doing so, along with that of Big Business and of the MSM. (FDR had the support of front-line journalists, but was almost universally scorned by the journos' employers.)

The GE boss in question, Jeffrey Immelt, along with the head of 3M Co., are among the many Fortune 500 CEOs who've taken Obama to task for his socialistic "meddling." (Yet Obama inexplicably chose Immelt as an advisor, an appointment that Russ Feingold, in recent retirement from the Senate, is now trying to reverse.) A certain class of wealthy Americans, again particularly in business - since business was found to have so profoundly failed in the 1930s - to this day insists FDR worsened rather than moderated the worst impacts of the Great Depression, a task akin to searching for unicorns. But one can't deny that sentiment, any more than gravity.

Canada is a very different country than the U.S., something Canadians haven't come to appreciate until relatively recent years. It is more secure in its identity, not subjecting its schoolchildren to daily recitations of national fealty, nor reluctant to question the moral basis and efficacy of our military activities, which can get you unelected in a hurry or banished from the airwaves (Bill Maher) in the U.S.

Fundamentally, though, the difference between these two countries sharing the northern portion of North America are these. Americans cling to a quite false belief in the power

of individualism and the right to be left alone that is grounded in a libertarian spirit predating the Revolution. This despite almost every remarkable advance in the history of the American Experience, from the Revolution itself to the Salk vaccine to the Internet, having been sponsored by the state.

Canadians, with no such illusions about the necessity of collective action, chose for their guiding national principle not the defiantly self-interested "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," but "peace, order and good government." In essence, to be American, according to that country's founding spirit, is to have the right to do as one pleases. To be Canadian is to consider the implications for others of the things one does. And so civility is our guiding principle.

That is not an argument for the superiority of one culture over others. The French put culture on a high pedestal indeed. To be British is almost a negative virtue: it means not to be infected with the impurities of the Continent. The European powers and Japan retain a sense of cultural superiority over other cultures.

Yet our experience of humanity teaches that we must accept people as we find them. Which in our case means asking non-Canadians to show forbearance about our national sweet tooth, inexplicable (to me) tolerance and even embrace of poutine, and revelry in the fisticuffs that reliably interrupt each contest in our national sport. (The superb European players emphasize skating skills, we idolize thugs with sharp elbows.)

In Canada, our patriotism is tempered by humility, given our diminutive population and knowledge of how others, from the Florentine bankers to the geeks of Silicon valley, have invented so many of the essentials of our own daily lives.

We do not believe the government is an enemy, but rather since before Confederation have demanded, with the emergence of any problem or challenge, that the government do something about it. (Hence our founding demand for "good government.") And so we need no persuading about the imperative of collective action. Thus words like "liberal," "welfare" and even "socialism" have little if any shock value here.

Canada's modern welfare state, including its social protections, state-funded research and granting institutions, its educational infrastructure, and its cultural institutions from the CBC to regional orchestras, have been the handiwork of political parties of all stripes through the generations. The Conservative Party of Canada, or Tories, are a bit to the *left* of America's Democratic Party.

It was the Tories who launched the first, largely state-financed Canadian mega-project, the Canadian Pacific Railway, and later the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and the first "baby bonuses" to help low-income parents. And in my province, it was Tories who built the modern-era universities, the province's network of community colleges, and the Science North, Ontario Science Centre and other recreational and cultural amenities, along with backstopping the financing of our great teaching hospitals, which for the most part are community, not privately, owned.

A rising conservative tide in America, a phenomenon unique among the major advanced nations, is central to public policymaking everywhere because for some decades America will remain the world's dominant economic, scientific and military power. America still leads, whether or not we choose to accept that fact. As recently as the current Libyan mission, France and Britain were mightily exercised about the urgent need for action. Yet they did nothing, though Libya is just across the Mediterranean from the French republic. No, action had to wait for America, and specifically Obama, Hillary Clinton, Susan Rice at the U.N. and Samantha Powers, the U.S. president's top advisor on genocide. And only then did other nations join in. This was the case with Bosnia and Kosovo, also, even though they too are in Europe's backyard, not in the U.S.'s North American sphere of direct influence.

Friends over the years, and occasionally readers of this blog, have wondered about my fascination with the U.S., dating from visits with relatives there in youth, and I can't apologize for it. I do study with equal fascination unfolding events and trends in countries that likely will rival the U.S. in many ways by mid-century, and take the pulse of my own homeland every day.

Hence my mild alarm at reading the results of Florida's latest project. It's not just that the U.S. has unavoidable influence in the world as no other, and is Canada's only neighbor. It's that I do and always have liked been for the most part favorably influenced by the American Experience.

Florida finds that 37 U.S. states are "conservative" or "above-average conservative." That leaves just 13 states with more liberal tendencies. And even in those 13 states, Americans self-identifying as conservative outnumber self-described liberals. By contrast, a consistent two-thirds of Canadians vote against the conservative parties, whatever names by which they happens to go by in a given era.

More troublesome - and this is not, or should not be, a partisan or ideological issue - American conservatives are more overtly religious, less well-educated, less embracing of diversity (immigrants and sexual orientation were among Florida's markers here), less affluent, and less likely to be engaged in the professional, creative and other wealth-producing vocations than "below-average conservatives." (It's striking that Florida doesn't talk of American "liberals," only of those whose conservatism is less pronounced than others.)

One could easily slip into the morally repugnant conclusion that American conservatives, answering to that unassailable empirically-based description, are second-class, or a lower tier of Americanism. Again, we take people as we find them, aware that the most disagreeable aspects of a given people are present in all ranks. (Just read the online comments on any Canadian newspaper site for ugly words about "pilfering my wallet" to lesson someone else's distress.)

You can get into big trouble, as an American, describing this American reality. This was Candidate Obama's fate in responding to a question at a 2008 California fundraiser about

the plight of poor people in Appalachia, whom the future president accurately described as clinging to their Bibles and guns, and whom he described as "bitter."

Such a sociological assessment uttered in London about the downtrodden of Yorkshire or Liverpool would pass without much if any comment. But in America, Obama had just revealed himself as an "elitist" for speaking truth as plain to see as the underfunded schools, libraries, firehalls and medical clinics of rural West Virginia.

A country that cannot be honest with itself hasn't much of a future. We do strive in my country to be candid about our shortcomings, which are manifest. And I believe this accounts for our above-average performance on a wide range of social "metrics." We know we have to do better. We know that certain conditions in our country are an embarrassment, in some cases an international disgrace, and always an impediment to making our current prosperity sustainable. We know, in short, that our worst enemy is complacency and national self-satisfaction. That was the death of Rome and of a GM that worked itself into bankruptcy. So we are muted in our celebration of what's so right about my country.

For the U.S. bank bailouts of 2008-09 (initially launched by free-marketer George W. Bush), in the absence of which the entire world including Canada would have plunged into a 1930s depression with unemployment of 25% to 30%, compared with the current 8.8%; and for the state rescues of GM and Chrysler, the underpinning of America's industrial infrastructure; and for Obamacare, a rather unambitious effort at catching up with long-entrenched genuine universal healthcare elsewhere in the OECD nations; for all this to be widely greeted in the U.S. with a firestorm of protest and vilification of the agents of betterment is profoundly indicative of an unpromising future for the great Republic.

For those who complain of a liberal tendency to high-handed presumptuousness, who nurse an image of progressives dictating to knuckle-draggers how they should live, the attempted transition to a better order of things under Obama broke with that stereotype. It was, in short, as good as it gets.

No stock liberal from Cental Casting, the current U.S. president is overtly respectful of blue-collar work and the lifestyle of the people who do it; of Americans with reservations about abortion and homosexuality (he shares those reservations); of Americans for whom religion is a defining fact of their lives (Obama himself is devout, in contrast with, say, Lincoln or Reagan); and of people who don't like being told what to do - that is, most of us.

Obamacare was the work of *five* Congressional committees, not the spawn of a secretive conclave of unelected experts as the previous effort 17 years earlier had been. Obama, having just won the third-largest majority vote of a successful Democratic presidential candidate in history, after a campaign that emphasized universal healthcare, had as resounding a mandate for Obamacare as any chief executive has had for any initiative.

Obama and a Democratic Congress then structured Obamacare so that it would roll out gradually over several years. Its most vote-appealing provisions not taking effect until 2014. That's not in time to help secure Obama's re-election. Yet Obama insisted on it being done that way. Why? In order to reduce as much as possible any shock to a medical-industrial complex accounting for 17% of the U.S. economy. Possibly not the best politics, but assuredly sound policy.

So, again, that's as good as it gets for progressives. Favorable conditions and a president and his party implementing change that was neither radical nor imposed suddenly, and so most potentially agreeable to the electorate as one could arrange. Yet still Obama's mildly progressive agenda is held deeply suspect by tens of millions of Americans. That's a powerful disincentive for the progressive successors of Obama, Nancy Pelosi, Harry Reid and the unsung heroes supporting the progressive agenda in Congress (many of them defeated in the midterms, along with Pelosi's demotion). A disincentive to attempt the still urgently needed reforms - in education, energy security, the environment - that must come in the U.S. or the country will take on a greater acquaintanceship with imperial decline, signs of which already are apparent to Americans of a pessimistic outlook.

The impediment to that next American Century, and the one after that, with Florida only giving further proof to this, is the rising tide of conservatism he documents. Bluntly speaking, there are too many Americans afraid of the future. Who are unwilling to embrace the new, the bold, the better. America has of course embraced innovative change more often than anyone could count. Yet oddly on issues that go to the core of where most Americans live - their standard of living and quality of life - there remains a stubborn resistance to beneficial change that appears so entrenched as not to be overcome, even by someone with the respectful, thoughtful bearing of a Barack Obama.

I'll end this overlong note with [Florida](#), far better than I at cutting to the chase:

Conservatism, at least at the state level, appears to be growing stronger. Ironically, this trend is most pronounced in America's least well-off, least educated, most blue-collar, most economically hard-hit states. Conservatism, more and more, is the ideology of the economically left behind.

The current economic crisis only appears to have deepened conservatism's hold on America's states. ... Liberalism, which is stronger in richer, better-educated, more diverse and, especially more prosperous places, is shrinking across the board and has fallen behind conservatism even in its biggest strongholds.

The long-term danger is economic rather than political. This ideological state of affairs advantages the policy preferences of poorer, less innovative states over wealthier, more innovative, and productive ones. American politics is increasingly disconnected from its economic engine. And this deepening political divide has become perhaps the biggest bottleneck on the road to long-run prosperity.

[Florida](#) is a New Jersey native who first achieved national acclaim during a long stint teaching at Carnegie Mellon, where he was a first-hand witness to the remarkable transformation of Pittsburgh from a blue-collar to a knowledge-based economy. For its burgeoning arts scene, upstart high-tech industries, and endowment of cultural amenities financed by long-gone steel barons, Pittsburgh is now ranked, by the three worldwide agencies that assess quality of life, as the most liveable city in America. Florida for the past few years has been running the Martin Prosperity Institute associated with the business school at the University of Toronto.

