

Critical Junctures

The first four critical junctures in U.S. political history appeared at points when mass discontent organized itself enough to change governing institutions or relationships. Each juncture challenged dominant ideas about who should have a voice in democratic government and what the relationship between government and citizen should be. Four periods of focused popular demand are explored here:

1. From the beginning of the American Revolution through the ratification of the Constitution and Bill of Rights
2. The Civil War and Reconstruction
3. The New Deal
4. The contemporary period of routinely divided national government and frequent shifts in which party controlled the presidency, the Senate, and the House of Representatives that began with the 1968 national elections

It was into this ongoing period of divided national government that the United States experienced the attacks of September 11, 2001.

The Revolutionary Era (1773–1789)

Mass and elite discontent with British colonial rule sparked the American Revolution and the signing of the **Declaration of Independence**. Mass interests wanted to keep

Declaration of Independence

The document asserting that the British colonies in what is now the United States had declared themselves independent from Great Britain. The Declaration of Independence was signed in Philadelphia on July 4, 1776.

North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)

A treaty among the United States, Mexico, and Canada implemented on January 1, 1994, that largely eliminates trade barriers among the three nations and establishes procedures to resolve trade disputes. NAFTA serves as a model for an eventual Free Trade Area of the Americas zone that could include most nations in the Western Hemisphere.

manifest destiny

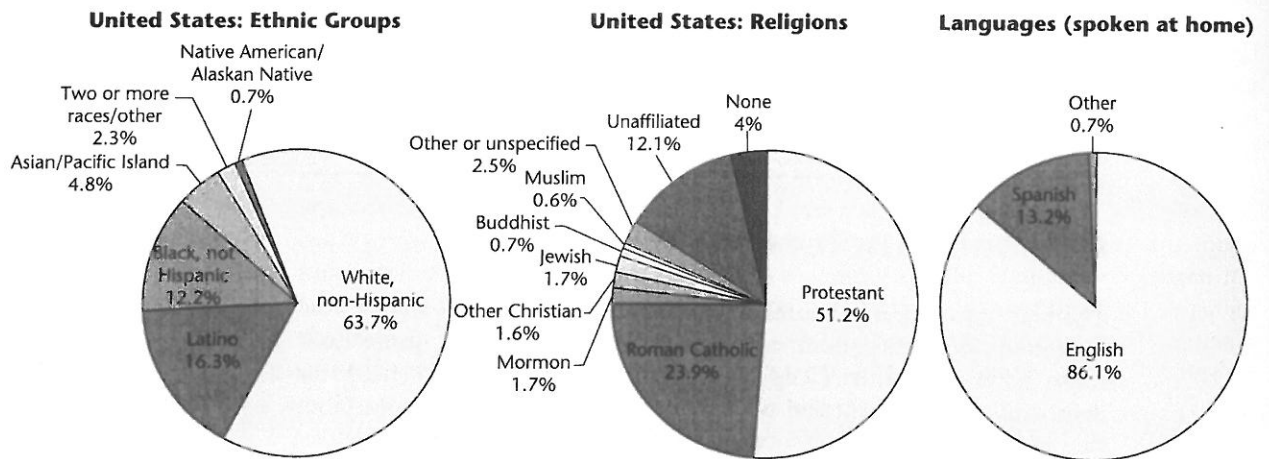
The public philosophy in the nineteenth century that the United States was not only entitled but also destined to occupy territory from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

Geographic Setting

The United States occupy nearly half of North America. Its only two neighbors, Mexico and Canada, do not present a military threat and are linked in a comprehensive trade agreement: the **North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)**. U.S. territory is rich in natural resources, arable land, navigable rivers, and protected ports. This abundance has led Americans to assume they will always have enough resources to meet national needs. Finally, the United States has always had low population densities and has served as a magnet for international migration.

European colonization led to the eventual unification of the territory that became the United States under one government and the expansion of that territory from the Atlantic to the Pacific Oceans. This process began in the early 1500s and reached its peak in the nineteenth century, when rapid population expansion was reinforced by an imperialist national ideology (**manifest destiny**) to expand all the way to the Pacific. Native Americans were pushed aside. The United States experimented with colonialism around 1900, annexing Hawaii, Guam, the Northern Marianas Islands, and Puerto Rico.

Puerto Rico is a colony of the United States with autonomy in local governance, but only limited autonomy in trade and foreign policy. Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens by birth and can travel freely to the United States. Although some in Puerto Rico seek independence, most want either a continuation of Commonwealth status or statehood. Guam is an “unincorporated territory” (a U.S. territory that is not on the road to statehood and does not have all of the protections of the U.S. Constitution).



American Currency

Dollar (\$) International Designation: USD
 100 Dollar Note Design: Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790)



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FIGURE 7.1 The American Nation at a Glance

Source: Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, 2007.