

The Values That Shape U.S. Culture

Adapted from "The Values Americans Live By" by L. Robert Kohls

The list below contains beliefs that have been described as central to U.S. culture. Following each value, there is a brief explanation, and the resulting effect it has on day-to-day culture.

Note that these are not true for everyone, and may not be true of the culture that you observe in your time here in the U.S. As stated below in value number two, change is seen as good in the U.S. As such, some of the beliefs and values in this list may appear only in novels, or explain some of the behaviors that you see in your history books.

1. Personal Control over the Environment

People can/should control nature, their own environment and destiny; future is not left to fate.
Result: The U.S. is seen as an energetic, goal-oriented society.

2. Change/Mobility

Change is seen as positive and good, and indicates progress, improvement, and growth.
Result: The U.S. is a transient society, geographically, economically, and socially.

3. Time and Its Control

Time is valuable; the achievement of goals depends on productive use of time.
Result: Efficiency and progress can be emphasized often at the expense of interpersonal relationships.

4. Equality/Egalitarianism

People have equal opportunities; people are important as individuals, for who they are, not from which family they come.
Result: Relative to some other cultures, little deference is shown or status acknowledged.

5. Individualism, Independence, and Privacy

People are seen as separate individuals (not group members) with individual needs. People need time to be alone and to be themselves.
Result: U.S. Americans can be seen as self-centered and sometimes isolated and lonely.

6. Self-Help

U.S. Americans take pride in own accomplishments, not in name.
Result: Respect is given for achievements, not "accident of birth."

7. Competition and Free Enterprise

U.S. Americans believe competition brings out the best in people and free enterprise produces the most progress and success.
Result: There can be less emphasis on cooperation than competition.

8. Future Orientation/Optimism

U.S. Americans believe that, regardless of past or present, the future will be better, happier.
Result: Less value placed on past; “forward-looking”; constant looking ahead to tomorrow

9. Action and Work Orientation

U.S. Americans believe that work is morally right; that it is immoral to waste time.
Result: More emphasis on “doing” rather than “being”; pragmatic, no-nonsense attitude toward life.

10. Informality

U.S. Americans believe that formality is “un-American” and a show of arrogance and superiority.
Result: This leads to a much more casual and generally egalitarian attitude between people and in their relationships than in some other cultures.

11. Directness, Openness, Honesty

One can only trust people who “look you in the eye,” and “tell it like it is.” Truth is not dependent on circumstance: “honesty is the best policy.”
Result: People tend to tell the “truth” and not worry about saving the other person’s “face” or “honor.”

12. Practicality/Efficiency

Practicality is usually the most important consideration when decisions are to be made.
Result: There is less emphasis on the subjective, aesthetic, and emotional elements or on consensual decisions.

13. Materialism/Acquisitiveness

Material goods are seen as the just rewards of hard work
Result: U.S. Americans can be seen as caring more for things than people or relationships.