Part I

Character and Democracy
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How is it possible that society should escape destruction if the moral tie is not strengthened in proportion as the political tie is relaxed?
Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America

For the founders of the American republic, character and the virtues of which character was comprised were essential to their experiment in democracy. Consider the chorus of opinion of the new republic’s leading lights:

- “It is substantially true that virtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government.”
  George Washington

- “It is the manners and spirit of a people which preserve a republic in vigor. A degeneracy in these is a canker which soon eats to the heart of its laws and constitution.”
  Thomas Jefferson

- “Is there no virtue among us? If there be not, we are in a wretched situation. No theoretical checks—no form of Government, can render us secure. To suppose that any form of Government will secure liberty or happiness without any form of virtue in the people, is a chimerical idea.”
  James Madison

For the architects of this bold political venture, the importance of character and the high moral qualities of which it was comprised was a basic article of democratic faith. Its significance was grounded in all they knew from the lessons of history. Two generations after the Declaration of Independence, a Frenchman, Alexis de Tocqueville, traveled through the American countryside and found that the hopes of the American founders had been provisionally realized virtue was, in fact, central to the vitality of American democratic life. “These habits of restraint,” he said, “are found again in political society and singularly favor the tranquility of the people as well as the durability of the institutions they have adopted.” Yet he too understood the precarious constitution of embodied virtue: “How is it possible that society should escape destruction if the moral tie is not strengthened in proportion as the political tie is relaxed?”

The Significance of Character Today

History and philosophy both suggest to us that the flourishing of character rooted in elevated virtues is essential to justice in human affairs; its absence, a measure of corruption and a portent of social and political collapse, especially in a democracy. The importance of character is a part of the moral imagination we Americans have inherited; a sensibility reinforced by the lessons of history.

It is this sensibility that continues to shape our understanding of character today. Ninety percent of those asked in this national survey agreed that “democracy is only as strong as the virtue of its citizens.” The opinion is not fleeting. By almost the same margin, Americans (78%) reject the notion that character “is just a nice-sounding word with little real meaning.” The majority (60%) also disagree that “the character issue is overblown by the media; that it is really not that important.”
The majority of Americans believe that there has been a moral decline in America. Sixty-four percent agree that “compared to 50 years ago, Americans are lacking in character.” Given this, it is not surprising that more than 8 out of every 10 Americans (85%) agree that the schools should be involved in teaching values to children and should not just stick to core subjects such as reading, writing, and arithmetic. Indeed, one-third believe that schools should be heavily involved in the teaching of values. Make no mistake: individual achievement is important to Americans, particularly as it pertains to children. Yet 77 percent of those surveyed disagree that “a child’s success is more important than the development of his or her character.” In sum, character continues to matter to Americans because Americans believe that without it, trust, justice, freedom, community, and stability are probably impossible.

In this year’s *Survey of American Political Culture*, we take up some of the questions surrounding character and its political significance. We consider how issues of morality and character play in the public’s mind, particularly as they pertain to political life. We also attempt to map the moral dispositions and commitments of typical Americans, examine their views of political leadership, and get a sense of their attitudes toward the current state of political life.

We should caution the reader from the outset: in this survey, we only scratch the surface of these issues. This is why the *Survey of American Political Culture* has been conceived as an ongoing series of surveys and survey reports and not just a one-time foray into the public’s attitudes toward these matters. By exploring these matters in this way, we at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture hope that this survey will enrich our understanding of the current political milieu and will help us to address more effectively the serious challenges posed in our day to both democracy and the culture that sustains it.