

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *The Political Culture of Connecticut*

State constitutions provide the legal and political framework within which citizens practice the art of self government at the subnational level of the federal system. State constitutions represent that which classical liberal political philosophers such as John Locke referred to as the “social contract” between free people. The functions and powers of state government, the rights of the people, and an array of public policies are defined and largely determined by the various articles, sections, and clauses within a state constitution.

The political attitudes and values of a state’s citizenry also, to a very large extent, condition the powers of government, the extent to which rights are preserved, and the style of politics that exists within a given state. Some political scientists argue that political attitudes and values more than any other variable including the constitutional structure of state government, exert the most important and decisive impact on the manner in which self government is enacted.

The term *political culture* is relevant here. Political culture, as defined by Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, consists of “political orientations and attitudes toward the political system and its various parts, and attitudes toward the role of the self in the system.”<sup>1</sup> Cross-national comparative studies of political culture, in-depth studies of other nations’ political cultures, and even comparative studies of political cultures among American states have occupied the attention and energy of many political scientists.

Relatively little work in the field of political culture has been conducted in recent years, although in preceding decades, particularly during the nineteen-sixties and seventies, the study of political culture flourished within the discipline of political science.

One of the first and most comprehensive studies of political culture was conducted during 1959 and 1960 by Professors Almond and Verba of Princeton University. In this pioneering study, they explored the political cultures of five democracies, each in a different stage of democratic development: the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, and Mexico. Almond and Verba's seminal work, which was based on more than five thousand interviews with citizens of the countries under investigation, was entitled *The Civic Culture*.<sup>2</sup>

The work of Almond and Verba demonstrated quite clearly that the political values of a nation's citizenry have direct bearing on the politics of a country, and determine to a significant extent whether a healthy and fully functioning democracy can be sustained. As Almond and Verba note, "A democratic form of participatory political system requires as well a political culture consistent with it."<sup>3</sup>

Comparative studies of political culture have been conducted not only among various countries, but also among the constituent parts of individual countries. Studies of state political cultures are relatively scarce, yet those that have been done provide insight into the style and character of politics in different regions of the United States, as well as within individual states. These studies of state political cultures are guided by the theoretical premise that the character of a state's political system, the vibrancy of politics within a given state, and the types of public policies supported by the people and legislatures of individual states mirror to a large extent the political attitudes and values of the state's citizenry. In order to understand the tradition of robust two-party competition in a particular state, the reasons a state may be characterized by an activist state legislature, or the reasons a state may expend a large portion of its operating budget on health-related public policies, one must inquire into the political values and beliefs of those who inhabit the state. The political culture of a state helps to explain its political and governing dynamics.

We will begin our exploration of state political culture with reference to the pioneering work of Professor Daniel Elazar.<sup>4</sup> Originally published in the mid nineteen-sixties, Elazar's framework has been helpful to political scientists with respect to analyzing and explaining political dynamics at the sectional and state level of American politics. While Elazar's classification scheme might be less applicable to state politics in the twenty-first century, due to the arrival in recent decades of immigrant groups from Latin America, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, his framework is still helpful for understanding how the political attitudes and values of state residents shape various aspects of state politics.

According to Elazar, the settlement patterns of various immigrant groups throughout the United States, and more important, the political values to which such groups subscribed, explain to a significant extent various dimensions of state and sectional politics. In Elazar's view, there were three "great streams of American migration" that conditioned the styles and patterns of politics at the state and sectional level of the American political system. A rather unique set of political values was associated with each "migratory stream," which in turn resulted in three fairly distinct patterns of politics. Thus, the national political culture, in Elazar's view, is essentially a synthesis of three subculture types, which for analytical purposes can be classified into "individualistic," "moralistic," and "traditionalistic" political subcultures.

According to Elazar, individualistic political culture places a premium on private concerns and personal advancement. There is very little communal spirit in states or regions where individualistic political culture is dominant, and subsequently, governmental activity tends to be kept to a minimum. Government regulation is looked upon somewhat suspiciously in individualistic political culture, and "there is a strong tendency among the public to believe that politics is a dirty—if necessary—business, better left to those who are willing to soil themselves by engaging in it."<sup>5</sup> Party professionals rather than citizens are expected to manage political affairs much like a business corporation. Moreover, public officials, not surprisingly, are reluctant to experiment with public policy. Individualistic political subculture, according to Elazar, is located mostly in the mid-Atlantic and midwestern states, where immi-

grant groups from non-Puritan England and the interior Germanic states eventually settled.

The moralistic political subculture is substantially different from the individualistic subculture, in that politics is looked upon not only as a necessary activity, but as a very positive activity. In states characterized by the moralistic subculture, political activity is generally regarded as a noble affair. There exists an expectation that the community at large should participate in the political process in the interest of serving the collective good. Politics is not regarded as the exclusive domain of party professionals, and involvement on the part of the common person is highly encouraged. As Elazar notes, "Politics, to the moralistic political culture, is considered one of the great activities of humanity in its search for the good society—a struggle for power, it is true, but also an effort to exercise power for the betterment of the commonwealth."<sup>6</sup>

In contrast to the individualistic subculture, within the context of moralistic political culture, governmental power is not looked upon suspiciously. Government is considered a positive instrument that can and should be harnessed to promote the general welfare. Political participation tends to be high, government regulation of economic affairs is not unusual, and public policy experimentation is common. The moralistic political culture is located primarily in the New England states, as well as states of the upper midwest, such as Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Iowa. It is a direct result, in Elazar's view, of the migratory pattern of the Puritans and their descendants: "The Puritans came to these shores intending to establish the best possible earthly version of the holy commonwealth. Their religious outlook was imbued with a high level of political concern, in the spirit of the ancient Israelites whose ideal commonwealth they wished to reproduce."<sup>7</sup>

The traditionalistic political subculture is radically different from both the individualistic and moralistic subcultures. The political attitudes and values of citizens in states where the traditionalistic subculture prevails are hardly conducive to a robust and dynamic system of politics. In this subculture type, there is a rather rigid and hierarchical system of politics in which a small group of ruling families exercise power and make decisions on behalf of the general public. In such a system, there is a paternal-

istic and elitist dimension to the political process. The business of government is not conducted with the public good in mind, but rather with an eye toward maintaining a stratified social order. The traditionalistic political culture "functions to confine real political power to a relatively small and self-perpetuating group drawn from an established elite who often inherit their right to govern through family ties or social position."<sup>8</sup>

Broad-based participation is discouraged in the traditionalistic political subculture. Political leaders are expected to be "conservative and custodial" in their leadership role, rather than creative and innovative. Elazar identifies the traditionalistic political subculture as most pervasive in American southern states, a pattern that reflects the pre-industrial plantation cultures and societies of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: "The people who settled the southern states were seeking individual opportunity in ways similar to those of their brethren to the immediate north. But, while the latter sought their opportunities in commercial pursuits, either in business or in a commercially oriented agriculture, those who settled the South sought opportunity in a plantation-centered agricultural system based on slavery and essentially anticommercial in orientation."<sup>9</sup>

Elazar's framework is helpful for analyzing the unique patterns of politics among different states and regions. Variations in public policy innovation, patterns and levels of political participation, and the roles assumed by political parties and party leaders are, according to this analytical framework, rooted in the political orientations and values of the people who initially settled the states.

Elazar's classification scheme is certainly relevant for understanding state and sectional political patterns during the preceding two centuries. The extent to which his classification scheme is applicable at the millennium, however, is debatable. The inter-regional migration of millions of Americans during the past two decades, along with the arrival in the United States of many diverse immigrant groups, has resulted in such deeply mixed state and regional political cultures that classification has become difficult. Indeed, as we enter the twenty-first century, there is reason to ask if in fact a "New England political subculture" or a "southern political subculture" still exists. Can the political

cultures of American states and regions currently be classified as "individualistic," "moralistic," or "traditionalistic?"

Regardless of whether or not the regions of the United States can still be classified according to Elazar's model or a mix of subculture types, the politics in a particular state is nevertheless affected and shaped by the attitudes and values of the state's residents. If state governing institutions are to play a decisive and meaningful role within the framework of state politics, then it would be expected that people of a state would exhibit a fairly high level of trust and confidence in the institutions of government, and, more generally, in those persons who are elected to public office. If state governing institutions are to play a creative problem solving role in the lives of people who reside in a state, then the attitudes of the state's citizenry would be expected to be conducive to governmental activism. Moreover, for political parties to perform a vital role in state politics, it is reasonable to expect a foundational set of attitudes and beliefs that sustain and encourage political party activity.

The underlying political beliefs of the people condition, to a significant extent, how a state's political process functions. A state's political process is essentially a manifestation and reflection of the political attitudes, values, and orientations that collectively comprise the state's "political culture." To understand more thoroughly the political patterns within a state, and to understand the style of government within a given state, it is important to explore the underlying political orientations of the state's citizenry. Thus, to more fully comprehend the current nature of Connecticut government and politics, it is important to examine and explore the political orientations and attitudes of Connecticut residents.

Data for this inquiry were acquired from the Roper Center at the University of Connecticut in Storrs. The Roper Center houses national polling data from virtually every major polling organization in the United States. The Center is also home to the Institute for Social Inquiry and the Connecticut Poll. The Connecticut Poll, administered by public opinion pollsters from the Roper Center, routinely taps a wide range of public attitudes toward politics and government within the state of Connecticut.

A typical Connecticut Poll, which generates a cross-section of the Connecticut population, will generally poll 500 adult state residents. The scientific nature of the poll allows broad-based generalizations to be developed regarding the political orientations and values of Connecticut citizens. Connecticut Poll data will be used to examine the political culture of Connecticut.

*Confidence in the State Legislature*

Our inquiry begins with an exploration of citizen attitudes related to confidence in the Connecticut state legislature. In theory, the state legislature is the organ of government where the will of the people is most directly represented. Are Connecticut residents pleased with the state legislature's performance?

Table 2  
Public Perceptions of the State Legislature's Performance

% Saying:	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor	Don't Know
March 1980	1	26	46	14	12
March 1981	2	30	43	12	14
June 1982	1	26	42	11	20
April 1983	2	23	43	14	18
May 1984	1	30	39	11	20
May 1985	2	45	29	5	18
June 1986	4	45	31	5	16
May 1989	1	24	46	19	11
May 1990	*	23	46	17	14
May 1991	3	27	40	19	10
July 1992	1	16	51	26	7
April 1993	1	23	50	17	8
May 1994	1	24	45	22	8
June 1997	1	28	51	12	8

Source: *Hartford Courant*/Institute for Social Inquiry Connecticut Poll. Question: How would you rate the job the state legislature—the General Assembly in Hartford—is doing? (This question was not asked of state residents in 1987, 1988, 1995, or 1996.) \* = less than .5%.

The data in table 2 suggest rather clearly that the level of confidence in the General Assembly has decreased. What is particularly obvious is the high percentage of respondents who rate the state legislature's performance as "fair," a perception that can hardly be described as positive or confident. For most of the nineteen-eighties and nineties, a plurality, and in some years a majority, of respondents selected the "fair" category to describe the state legislature's performance. For two years, 1985 and 1986, positive perceptions of the legislature appeared to rise, with 45 percent of respondents rating the institution's performance as "good." This was short-lived however, with consistent pluralities and majorities once again rating the legislature's performance as "fair" from 1989 through 1994, as well as 1997. In 1997, only 28 percent of respondents viewed the legislature as performing well, while 51 percent regarded the legislature's performance as fair. A tiny percentage of Connecticut citizens rated performance as "excellent," often only 1 percent. A small but alarming percentage rated the legislature's performance as "poor."

When the data are collapsed, the performance ratings of the Connecticut state legislature over the course of almost two decades (with the exception of four years) are not very favorable. Collapsing the fair and poor categories results in the finding that a substantial majority of citizens expressed a negative opinion of the legislature's performance. The confidence in this institution expressed by Connecticut residents is not impressive.

Are such findings alarming? Perhaps so. Policies passed by a legislative body are more likely to be accepted by the general public, and public policies are more likely to be successfully implemented when the people have confidence in the institution responsible for making the laws. It is, of course, possible that negative opinions are not directed specifically toward the Connecticut state legislature, but instead reflect a general aversion to political institutions. Such an aversion has characterized the American public over the course of the past thirty years.<sup>10</sup> National polls have routinely discovered low levels of trust and confidence expressed toward governing institutions and politicians. The Vietnam War, Watergate, Iran-Contra hearings, and the more recent Clinton/Lewinsky scandal, in addition to increasingly

aggressive and hostile media coverage of political figures, have contributed to public attitudes of suspicion, apathy, and apprehension regarding government and politics. Quite possibly, the attitudes expressed by Connecticut residents toward their state legislature mirror the national political trend.

Negative perceptions of the Connecticut state legislature are further evident in responses to a more specific question regarding the state legislature's performance. Consider the responses to the following question: "Generally speaking, do you think the politicians in Hartford are sincerely trying to solve the state's many problems, or are they mostly playing politics?" Twenty-six percent of persons polled replied "sincerely trying" while 64 percent, a large majority, replied "playing politics." Six percent replied "some of each," while 4 percent replied "don't know."<sup>11</sup>

In 1997, the state legislature was unable to conclude its business, and there was serious debate as to whether or not to hold a special legislative session. Connecticut residents were asked this question: "What do you think is most to blame for the legislature not finishing all its business—too much on the agenda, not working efficiently enough, or the Governor and legislative leaders playing politics?" Ten percent replied "too much on the agenda," 19 percent stated "not efficient," while 54 percent replied "playing politics."<sup>12</sup> Such responses do not suggest public confidence in the Connecticut General Assembly.

### *Attitudes Toward Political Leaders*

Distance from and displeasure with the political process can also be observed in responses to a series of questions regarding political leadership (table 3). Especially interesting is the way in which the public perceives politically related occupations compared to non-political areas.

As indicated by the data, the term "politician" evoked a positive response from slightly over half of Connecticut residents, while the category of "elected official" was perceived in favorable terms by 62 percent of respondents. Forty-four percent of respondents expressed unfavorable views of politicians, while 33 percent of persons polled viewed elected officials in unfavorable terms.

Table 3  
Attitudes Toward Five Occupational Categories

% Saying:	Politicians	Elected Officials	Religious Leaders	People in News Media	Used Car Salesmen
Very Favorable	1	2	7	10	1
Moderately Favorable	50	60	44	61	20
Moderately Unfavorable	35	27	26	18	32
Very Unfavorable	9	5	10	4	27
Don't Know	4	6	13	7	18

*Source: Hartford Courant/Institute for Social Inquiry Connecticut Poll, April 10, 1989. Question: I am going to read you a list of some groups of people and I would like to know what your opinion is of each of them. Is your opinion of them favorable, moderately favorable, moderately unfavorable, or very unfavorable?*

It is evident that a sizeable number of people in 1989 had a negative attitude toward elected public officials and those who pursue politics as a career. "Religious leaders" were viewed in a similar light. Fifty-one percent of respondents expressed favorable orientations toward the clergy, while 36 percent expressed unfavorable opinions. Connecticut residents are not averse to religious leaders, but neither are they largely impressed by them. More than one-third of the persons polled expressed unfavorable orientations toward those in positions of religious authority. This significant percentage, as well as the large percentage of unfavorable reactions to politicians and elected officials, is perhaps a further reflection of the post-Vietnam and post-Watergate distrust of many Americans toward those in positions of power and authority, whether secular or religious.

Persons in the news media were perceived most positively. Seventy-one percent of persons polled expressed favorable opinions toward newscasters and journalists. Used car salesmen, not surprisingly, are viewed with the most apprehension by the Connecticut public. Fifty-nine percent of persons polled expressed an unfavorable view of this frequently criticized occupational category.

*Expectations of Government*

A people's expectations of their government influence the role that government plays in their everyday lives, and the degree to which this may or may not be welcomed. Public expectations have direct bearing on whether state government assumes an activist or restrained posture. If state citizens expect their government to provide a range of services and to assume responsibility for active problem-solving, it reasonably follows that government will be a pervasive presence in the daily lives of the governed. Conversely, should the public prefer a limited role for government, and feel that the onus for problem-solving lies more with the individual or in the private sector, it follows that a more limited form of state government will be likely to emerge. Moreover, the public's expectations of their state governments shed light on the prevailing ideology within particular states. Although measuring state ideological character is a complex and multifaceted task, basic expectations of state governments may still provide insight into the ideological orientation of the state citizenry. Degree of liberalism and conservatism present within a state populace can be generally gauged from public expectations toward government.

Table 4  
Citizen Expectations of Connecticut State Government

Expected Role	Percent of Respondents
Small as Possible	14
Take an Active Role	82
Somewhere in Middle	2
Don't Know	2

Source: *Hartford Courant*/Institute for Social Inquiry Connecticut Poll, January 12, 1992. Question: Which of the following comes closest to your view of what the state government in Hartford should be: a) The state government should have as limited a role as possible, and do only those things that no one else really can; or b) The state government should take an active role to make Connecticut as good a place to live as it can.

The data in table 4 suggest persuasively that Connecticut citizens prefer an expanded and activist problem-solving role for state government. An overwhelming majority, eighty-two percent, expressed the attitude that the state should assume "an active role" in improving the lives of Connecticut residents. Government, according to this poll, is viewed by many in Connecticut as a force that should be harnessed in the interests of promoting the collective welfare. The data suggest that the citizens of Connecticut expect their state government to take the lead in solving problems. Indeed, the Connecticut public believes state government should assume an active role in several policy areas, as table 5 clearly demonstrates.

The data in table 5 clearly indicate that a large majority of Connecticut residents believe it is "very important" that the state government be actively involved in promoting, creating, or assisting with policies that benefit its people. This orientation extends throughout numerous policy areas, including economic development, civil rights, consumer protection, highway maintenance, crime prevention, public education, job creation, healthcare, affordable higher education, and ensuring adequate nutrition. In some areas, such as highway maintenance or public education, it might be expected that the public would support governmental activism, while in other areas, such as business productivity, job creation, and healthcare, more support for private sector initiatives might have been anticipated. The data, however, show that the Connecticut public leans strongly toward government activism and leadership in many areas.

This is further confirmed in the following responses: "Generally speaking, do you think the government has a special responsibility to find meaningful work for mentally retarded citizens?" Sixty-one percent of persons polled replied "yes," 32 percent replied "no," while 7 percent did not know.<sup>13</sup> Responses to the statement, "The government has a special responsibility to discourage teenagers from smoking," 80 percent of persons polled agreed, 18 percent disagreed, and 1 percent did not know.<sup>14</sup>

It is clear that the citizens of Connecticut support a decisive role for their state government. Moreover, polling data suggest a liberal leaning on the part of the state's adult population. Public

Table 5  
Public Expectations of Government in Specific Policy Areas

Policy Areas	Very	Somewhat	Not At All	Don't Know
Keep state business competitive	68%	21%	7%	3%
Ensure fair treatment for women and racial minorities	63	26	10	1
Protect citizens from unsafe or dangerous products	55	30	15	1
Maintain highways	69	29	2	
Keep residents safe from crime	78	16	5	1
Provide free and quality education through high school	87	11	2	
Provide jobs for everyone willing to work	61	23	14	1
Provide quality health care	76	15	10	
Provide affordable public colleges for state residents	71	23	5	2
Make sure that all citizens have enough to eat	62	28	8	1

Source: *Hartford Courant*/Institute for Social Inquiry Connecticut Poll, January 12, 1992. Question: People disagree about what the state government here in Connecticut, as opposed to either other levels of government or the private sector, should do. For each of the following, please tell me if it is a very important responsibility for the state government, somewhat important, or something the state should leave to others and not be involved in at all. \* = less than .5%.

expectations of government are high; there will undoubtedly be increasing demands for efficient government and strong political leadership in the years ahead. Reflecting upon the data in table 2 regarding public confidence in the state legislature, it is possible that current public expectations of and demand for public services exceed the performance capability of the Connecticut legislature. This discrepancy might account for the rather negative slant in the public's perception toward this institution.

High expectations for state government are further revealed in responses to questions concerning the state's responsibilities to the inner cities. Several of Connecticut's cities, such as Hartford, Waterbury, New Haven, and Bridgeport, are among the most impoverished in the Northeast. Many commentators have noted the extreme dichotomy in living standards, life-styles, and the quality of public education between the urban areas of Connecticut and the surrounding affluent suburbs. The question is whether or not state government has a responsibility to attempt to resolve the problems that have beset the inner cities.

Table 6  
Perceptions Toward State Government Responsibility to Inner Cities

Responses	Percent of Respondents
State owes it to cities	57
Up to cities on their own	29
Don't know	14

*Source: Hartford Courant/Institute for Social Inquiry Connecticut Poll, September 17, 1991. Question: A lot of the problems of Connecticut are concentrated in the big cities. Do you think the state government owes it to the cities to help pay for solutions to their problems, or should it basically be up to the cities to deal with the problems on their own?*

The data reveal strong support among the Connecticut public for state-initiated and state-sponsored solutions to inner city problem areas. Although the poll did not make inquiries regarding specific areas of support, it may be surmised that improving the

infrastructure of cities (such as roads and bridges), crime prevention, public educational assistance, and economic development may be areas that many residents have in mind. Residents also feel it is the state's responsibility to assist local towns and communities. In response to the question, "Do you think the problems of Connecticut's big cities should be a special focus for the state government, or should all towns and cities be treated pretty much the same?" 48 percent replied that the cities should receive "special focus," while 45 percent replied that the state should "treat all the same." Three percent replied that "it depends," while 3 percent did not know.<sup>15</sup> Clearly, the public supports an activist and state-supported local community agenda.

With broad support for state government activism in many areas of life, it is not surprising that the public would also expect the state to take an active role in promoting leisure activity for Connecticut residents. Some indication of support for state involvement is found in responses to this question: "The state has been involved in trying to keep the Whalers in Hartford, and attract other teams like the Hellcats and the Patriots. Do you think this is an appropriate thing for the state government to do—or granted all the other problems facing the state do you think it should not pay any attention to this?" Sixty-three percent of persons polled replied that it was an "appropriate" action, while 32 percent replied that the state should "not pay attention" to such matters. Nine percent did not know.<sup>16</sup> This poll was administered in 1993. In 1999, after many months of negotiations with the owner of the New England Patriots, Connecticut's Governor John G. Rowland, along with the Speaker of the Connecticut House of Representatives Thomas Ritter, announced that a deal had been struck between the state of Connecticut and Robert Kraft, owner of the New England Patriots, to relocate the "Pats" from Foxboro, Massachusetts to a newly constructed stadium in Hartford, a further reflection of the willingness of the Connecticut public to let the state's governing apparatus take the lead in meeting the needs of the state's citizenry.

Although the Patriots deal eventually disintegrated, it is nevertheless difficult to imagine a Connecticut governor only ten years ago or less becoming immersed in the business of luring a

professional sports team to the state. Rowland's involvement in attempting to bring the Patriots to Connecticut is certainly emblematic of the evolving and ever-increasing role of Connecticut state government.

### *Civic Responsibility, Civic Competence, and Political Efficacy*

The extent to which residents of a particular state express a sense of civic responsibility, are knowledgeable about politics, and feel in control of their government has direct and important implications for the functioning of state government. As Almond and Verba note, for a political system to function as an effective and stable democracy, there must be a core set of underlying beliefs and values among the citizenry that are conducive to democratic governance. In addition to respecting such fundamental democratic rights as freedom of speech, press, religion, and assembly, state residents must also exhibit a respectable level of commitment to civic affairs. Simultaneously, a sufficient level of knowledge about politics is required in order to understand the mechanics and consequences of the policy process. *Civic responsibility* and *civic competence* are the terms used by political scientists to describe this set of orientations.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, the public must believe that it is empowered to exert influence over persons in positions of political authority. This orientation is commonly known as *political efficacy*. Degree of political efficacy has important implications for the political behavior of the citizenry. As Almond and Verba put it, "If an individual believes he has influence, he is more likely to attempt to use it."<sup>18</sup> Almond and Verba also note that government officials are more likely to perform their duties with public opinion in mind if they perceive their constituency as influential.

### *The Findings*

Public responses to a variety of questions pertaining to civic responsibility are quite encouraging (table 7). Residents of Connecticut seem to believe that a certain degree of civic responsibility is desirable among citizens.

Table 7  
Political Activity

Perceived Importance	Voting in Elections	Writing a Congressman
Very Important	83%	57%
Somewhat Important	15	38
Not too important	1	3
Not at all important	1	1
Don't know	*	1

Source: *Hartford Courant*/Institute for Social Inquiry Connecticut Poll, June 18, 1996. Question: "When you think of what it is that makes someone a good citizen, how important is each of the following?" \* = less than .5%.

The vast majority of Connecticut residents perceive voting as a "very important" form of political activity, while a clear majority perceive writing to a congressional representative to be "very important" as well. When the "very important" and "somewhat important" categories are collapsed, the data suggest exceptional support for two forms of political activity considered central to the existence of democracy: voting (98 percent) and contacting elected officials (95 percent). Connecticut residents are also quite interested in political affairs. When asked "Do you participate actively in government and civic affairs, are you interested in government and civic affairs but do not participate actively in them, are you not very interested, or are you hardly interested in government and civic affairs at all?" 15 percent replied that they "actively participate" in civic affairs, 66 percent responded "interested, but not active," 12 percent responded "not very interested," while 7 percent replied "hardly interested at all."<sup>19</sup> Connecticut citizens, based on this poll, appear to be paying attention to persons elected to positions of power; there seems to be a sense of political responsibility among the Connecticut electorate.

Civic competence is present among Connecticut residents as well. Consider the responses to a 1989 poll. Asked "How much

attention do you pay to local politics?" 36 percent of respondents replied "a lot," 30 percent "some," 22 percent "only a little" and 12 percent said "none at all." Combined responses suggest that 66 percent of citizens follow local political affairs. This figure is slightly higher with regard to degree of attention paid to state politics, with 26 percent of persons polled responding "a lot," 44 percent "some," 24 percent "only a little," and 6 percent "none at all." Combined responses suggest that 70 percent of Connecticut residents have a substantial or some interest in state government and politics. With respect to national politics, the figures are even higher, with 31 percent of residents responding "a lot," 48 percent "some," 19 percent "only a little," and 3 percent "none at all." Seventy-nine percent of persons polled responded "a lot" or "some." Data regarding attention given to local, state, and national politics strongly suggest a citizenry cognizant of the political environment, a clear indication of a politically competent electorate.<sup>20</sup> Identical questions were asked again in 1995, with those concerning local politics omitted. Results once again indicated politically competent residents. Regarding attention paid to state politics, 21 percent of respondents stated "a lot" and 45 percent "some," while with respect to attention paid to national politics, 27 percent replied "a lot," while 47 percent responded "some." Combined responses in each category indicate that two-thirds of citizens pay a respectable level of attention to state politics, while 74 percent cultivate some awareness of national political events.<sup>21</sup> Data gathered in 1989 and 1995 strongly suggest that Connecticut residents do observe the political process to varying degrees. Although watching and understanding are not the same, it may be surmised that a basic grasp of the political process is inherent in those paying attention to politics, whether local, state, or national.

Evidence of political knowledge among the Connecticut electorate emerges from responses in 1996 concerning political candidates and issues during election campaigns. The question asked was "How often would you say you know enough about the candidates and issues to make an informed choice?" Thirty-five percent of persons polled responded "almost always," 41 percent "most of the time," 19 percent "only sometimes," and 4 percent

"almost never." One percent replied "half the time," and 1 percent did not know. When collapsed, the figures show 76 percent of respondents indicating a respectable level of knowledge about political candidates and campaign issues during an election year.<sup>22</sup>

Additional, although not overwhelming, evidence of public awareness of the state political process appears in responses to this poll conducted in 1993. When asked "How familiar are you with what the Connecticut legislature did last session?" 8 percent replied "very familiar," while 41 percent replied "somewhat familiar." Thirty-four percent of persons polled replied that they had "only a little" familiarity with the activity of the state legislature, while 16 percent said that they had no familiarity at all.<sup>23</sup> The fact that approximately half of the persons polled indicated either extensive or some familiarity with the activity of the Connecticut General Assembly is remarkable in light of the criticism that few Americans express familiarity with the workings of their respective state legislature.

The extent to which Connecticut residents feel they can affect the policy process is evaluated through a series of questions that tap self-perceptions of political efficacy. In order for a democracy to function effectively, citizens must feel that their voices in politics matter. An electorate that demonstrates a sense of civic competence and responsibility is most likely to exhibit a sense of political empowerment as well. It follows that individuals who feel a responsibility to participate in the political process and who demonstrate a basic understanding of their system of government may be expected to believe that voting is important. It is not surprising to find Connecticut citizens expressing attitudes and orientations indicative of political efficacy. Responses to five specific questions designed to measure this self-perception offer insight into yet another dimension of Connecticut political culture.

To the statement, "It really doesn't matter whether you vote or not, because one vote more or less won't make any difference," 74 percent of respondents in 1996 replied "strongly disagree," while 13 percent replied "mostly disagree." Only 3 percent replied "strongly agree," while 4 percent stated "mostly agree."<sup>24</sup> Responses to the same statement in 1989 also reveal public self-

perceptions of political efficacy, with 56 percent of respondents stating “strongly disagree” and 36 percent “mostly disagree.”<sup>25</sup> The Connecticut electorate believes that voting is important and that individual votes matter.

A strong negative reaction emerged to the statement “Not voting at all is a good way to show how you feel and to protest against the choice of candidates we face.” Seventy-five percent of persons polled in 1996 replied “strongly disagree,” 14 percent stated “mostly disagree,” 5 percent replied “strongly agree,” while 6 percent said “mostly agree.”<sup>26</sup> In 1989, 56 percent of respondents replied “strongly disagree,” while 36 percent selected “mostly disagree.”<sup>27</sup> Non-voting is apparently looked upon by many Connecticut citizens as a dysfunctional form of political protest with little intrinsic value for promoting political change. The importance of voting in electoral contests is subtly suggested in responses to a 1989 poll. To the statement “It doesn’t matter who gets elected anyway. The country will be just about the same whoever is President,” 32 percent of respondents replied “strongly disagree,” 50 percent replied “mostly disagree,” 14 percent stated “mostly agree,” and 3 percent said “strongly agree.”<sup>28</sup>

The evidence clearly points to a Connecticut electorate that believes that non-voting serves little purpose, and that voting is important. Each poll explored in this section suggests a strong sense of political efficacy among Connecticut citizens. Connecticut residents apparently cannot be easily manipulated by public officials, nor does it appear that they are detached from the political process.

### *Conclusion*

In this chapter, the political culture of Connecticut has been explored by reviewing public perceptions toward the state legislature and political leaders, public expectations of state government, and citizen attitudes related to civic responsibility, civic competence, and political efficacy. Although this is a limited inquiry, important aspects of Connecticut political culture have emerged.

The state’s political culture appears to be characterized by a declining confidence in government—specifically the state

legislature—and there seems to be an element of political cynicism among the general public. The Connecticut electorate is currently disenchanted with the political process. Confidence in the state legislature has declined, and state law makers are frequently perceived as playing politics rather than serving their constituents. The Connecticut electorate does not appear to regard politicians and elected officials with disdain, but responses do reveal that a fairly significant number of residents have negative views toward those in positions of political leadership.

Confidence in government appears to be declining at a time when citizen expectations of government are rising. It is apparent that government in Connecticut is looked upon as a mechanism integral and essential to the everyday lives of people. It is not perceived as an intrusive force, but as helpful and necessary. The political culture encourages governmental activism, not restraint, and government services are widely supported. Economic regulation, job creation, road repair, civil rights protection, healthcare, and aid to inner cities and local communities are considered part of the legitimate realm of government activity. Because Connecticut political culture places high value on government, public expectations of state government may be anticipated to rise with the ongoing devolution of power to state governments.

Connecticut's political culture is characterized by citizen awareness and a strong feeling that political power flows from the governed to those who govern. A high level of civic responsibility, civic competence, and political efficacy are indicated by the data. Citizens appear to value political participation and to take a genuine interest in political affairs. Voting also seems important to Connecticut residents, which suggests an excellent foundation for meaningful grassroots activism. The Connecticut electorate maintains its connection with its political environment and, from all indications, cannot be easily manipulated. In some respects, such findings conform to Elazar's conception of the "moralistic political culture."

In the broadest sense, Connecticut citizens expect much from their state government, and there is reason to believe that demands will remain very high. Even though somewhat disenchanted with the performance of their state legislature, residents give little

indication of withdrawing from or losing interest in politics. Increasing efficiency in the delivery of services will be expected and government institutions will be expected to respond accordingly. It may be surmised that the prevailing political culture of Connecticut will contribute to an expanded state government with increased administrative capacity. In the following interview, G. Donald Ferree, the Director of the Connecticut Poll, sheds light on the political culture of Connecticut, as well as the process of scientific public opinion polling.

## *Profile and Perspective*

G. Donald Ferree,  
Director, Connecticut Poll  
University of Connecticut  
Phone interview, July 6, 2000

*What is your background and how long have you been the Director of the Connecticut Poll?*

I was originally hired in 1978 by the University of Connecticut to found a survey research service. Beginning with a pilot in the spring of 1979, we have been doing roughly 10 surveys on average per year. Originally these were sponsored by the CBS affiliate, WFSB-TV, but since 1981 the poll has been sponsored by the *Hartford Courant*, the largest newspaper in the state. The poll is intended to present a comprehensive portrait of the state on a wide variety of issues and is part of the University's effort to provide high quality research that can serve as a standard of information for both the state and the broader community as well. I came here from Harvard, where I "cut my teeth" on survey research, in terms of theoretical methodological work, and as a graduate student running a national survey of various elite groups and the general population of the United States. That led to being hired by the University of Connecticut with this particular mandate.

*Why is the study of public opinion so important?*

In a democracy, public views concerning particular policy outcomes, which policies are preferred, and the values and perceptions that people bring to a debate, are a component of public decision making. Of course, public decisions are not always made based on the public's perceptions of issues, because then we would have government by referendum. Nevertheless, public perceptions do play an important role in policy debate. Scientific public opinion polling is the single best method of measuring how

the public thinks about issues—not just politics, but lifestyle issues as well. For example, what do people do for fun, or how important is work compared to time spent with family? All of these orientations can be measured by surveys.

*The Connecticut Poll normally surveys and draws generalizations from 500 respondents. How is this done?*

This poll is a scientific process that involves random digit dialing of phone numbers generated by a computer. Homes are randomly selected through this process and the person interviewed within the home is also randomly selected. Inferences about the population based on a small sample may then be made. Questions must also be unbiased and tap the belief which is being inquired about. So if the right procedure for generating a sample of respondents is used, as well as the right set of questions, then inferences about the general population from a sample of 500 respondents may be made.

*Since you have been conducting surveys in Connecticut, what major changes have you observed with respect to the public's attitude toward politics and government?*

We have been doing surveys since 1979, which was the end of the Carter presidency and just before the Reagan presidency. At that time, people were quite skeptical about the ability of government to accomplish its goals, and skeptical about the goals the government wanted to accomplish. This was one of the reasons Ronald Reagan won the presidency. In the years since, the belief that government can accomplish its goals has waxed and waned, depending on the goals. We noticed a more conservative stance regarding what government should do during the Reagan administration, which has since become more liberal, but not to the point that it was during the Carter Administration and the era of big government. At the same time, we have seen heightened awareness of the environment, recycling, and issues such as these. There is also a growing acceptance that more has to be done to achieve racial equality.

*My examination of Connecticut Poll data suggests that for the last two decades residents of Connecticut have not been overly impressed with*

*the state legislature's performance. Do you have any thoughts on this trend?*

One has to remember that collective entities are rated less well than the individuals who make them up. If you talk about doctors in general compared to your doctor, or Congress in general compared to your congressperson, or the state legislature compared to your state representative, you are typically going to hear a lower view of the collective body. Regarding the legislature specifically, you are also likely to hear about scandals, which will alter your view of the legislature as a whole, even though your legislator might be totally uninvolved. Another factor that determines perceptions of the legislature as well as the governor is how well things are going in the state. Surpluses result in higher ratings, while large deficits lower perceptions. So there are really several dimensions to public perceptions of the state legislature: the collective entity, scandal, and the state of economic affairs.

*Residents of Connecticut, I have noticed, expect a lot from their government in terms of public services. The expectations of government are currently very high in this state. Why is this so?*

People don't want government interference, but they do want government help. When there are perceived societal problems, such as violence in schools or children not learning, the only place to really turn is to government. While people might disagree about the specific goals the government establishes, it nevertheless fulfills a broad agenda. Also, when the economy is strong and people don't perceive the government as being terribly burdensome, a perception which may be reinforced with tax cuts or tax rebates, this opens the possibility of government doing more for people without them feeling they necessarily have to pay for it.

*How closely do lawmakers and governors in the state of Connecticut monitor the public's views on issues? Do they follow the results of the Connecticut Poll?*

It is very difficult for politicians to ignore the result of public opinion polls—almost as difficult as it is to ignore a ringing telephone. It is part of responsible public leadership to know what the public thinks about issues. I would never suggest that polls can

replace the representative process, but certainly polls should be considered when making public decisions.

*As we cross into the new century, what issues are foremost in the minds of the Connecticut public?*

There is a certain amount of stability in public opinion and there are always some issues that are considered most important, including education and crime control. People want their children to learn and they want to live in a safe environment. Some new issues involve growing concern over health care issues and new orientations regarding retirement plans. We seem to be moving away from a situation in which people expect social security and private pensions to form the cornerstone of their retirement funds, to one in which people are relying more on retirement plans involving individualized choice. There is less confidence in social security.

*Is there anything you would like to expand on that we have not covered?*

I think it is important to realize that people in many states, Connecticut included, generally like where they live. They feel pretty good about their lives. So where government can act to preserve that and enhance their lives, then it is a good idea to do so. This presents to politicians a certain mandate, although not necessarily specific guidance concerning which particular policies to pursue.