

7. Introduction to U.S. Society

A democratic society

America is a democratic society. All adults over the age of 18 have the right to vote. There is a right to free speech in a democracy. Americans have the right to express their opinions freely.

However, it is against the law to practice racism and religious hatred or to be violent towards others.

Newspapers, TV and radio also have the right to free speech. But like everyone else, they must not break the law. You will find a variety of newspapers in the U.S. Some like *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today* aim to cover important stories in a serious way. Others like the *Daily News*, *the New York Post* and the *Chicago Sun Times* are written to read more sensationally and are referred to as "tabloids." For example, they print gossip and stories about celebrities, or famous people. The newspapers are privately owned and they are free to express opinions about the president and government, politicians and political parties.

Most Americans like a good discussion or debate. You can express your opinion and the other person should respect it, even if they disagree with you. However, some opinions will be difficult for most Americans to accept. These include racism, sexism, and being unkind about people who have a disability.

Americans have a reputation for having a good sense of humor. American film and TV comedies are famous all over the world. Americans like stand-up comedy, sit-coms and physical comedy or "slap-stick" as well as clever or witty humor.

Remember that the United States is just that: a connected group of states. All Americans have two loyalties: their loyalty to the USA and their loyalty to their home state (Texas, Wisconsin, New Jersey, etc.). The U.S. is a very diverse place, geographically, politically and culturally. How people speak and behave in the South is very different from how people speak and behave on the West Coast. You can learn a lot about America from the differences between Americans.

Remember that your English teachers will be happy to listen to your experiences of life in the U.S. They will also try to explain different sorts of behavior.

Relations between men and women in America

In the U.S., men and women are treated equally. Boys and girls do some household tasks, such as clearing the table or helping to prepare meals.

Nowadays, almost all women continue to work after they get married and many do the same after they have children. This is not only for financial reasons: women in the U.S. enjoy their independence and freedom.

This means that many women do not expect men to pay for things, such as meals in restaurants. They do not wait until they are married to leave home and just as many women as men go to college.

You should not be surprised to see women doing many things that men do, such as playing football, driving buses and drinking beer at bars! It is common to see men and women holding hands, perhaps even hugging and kissing in public. You may also see same sex couples holding hands and showing affection in public; mostly this is seen in large cities. "Straight" men don't usually touch other men, except to shake hands.

Homosexuality is not illegal and if you live in a big city you will notice that there are gay bars and clubs. In fact, most modern Americans are usually quite relaxed about homosexuality.

Study tips

To get an idea of free and open debate in America you could watch a TV program like "Real Time with Bill Maher" or the widely popular comedy news program "The Daily Show." All of these programs, among others, offer varying points of view on many political topics. You can also try listening to public radio programming, such as National Public Radio (NPR) or Public Radio International (PRI). These programs air on public radio stations across the country.

A good idea would be to record the programs or radio programs on video, DVD or audiotape so that you can stop and go back if you want to listen to something again. Many programs are offered online after their airdate, as well. This will give you a good idea of the main topics of interest in the U.S. each week.

Look at a variety of American newspapers and decide which one you like most.

Observe and listen to American people. Make notes in your notebook. Ask yourself these questions:

- How emotionally 'warm' or 'cold' are American people?
- Is American 'small talk' a complete waste of time?
- How equal are American men and women in the home?
- Are American women better at offering emotional support than men?
- Do Americans treat their offspring more like friends than children?
- Do Americans respect free speech and others' opinions even if they don't agree with them?
- Do you think Americans generally have a good sense of humor? What makes Americans laugh?
- How important are state identities within the U.S.? Do people consider themselves a Texan or Georgian first and American second? How do they show their state identities?



Making friends in America

Many people think that Americans are, in general, more reserved than in other countries. For example, you may notice that strangers usually do not speak to each other on trains or buses. However, it is easy to make friends with Americans and below are some points to help you.

You may find friends in your host family, especially if members of the family are close to your own age.

They may suggest some free-time activities, such as sports or going to bars and clubs. Remember: try anything once. Even if you don't enjoy it, you will learn something about life in the U.S. If you do enjoy it, you can do it again and perhaps make

more friends. You might also want to join clubs outside of college in order to meet Americans. There are local clubs for people who like sports, art, music, local history and many other things. Don't worry if the people are not your age – they will still be friendly!

We could also arrange some volunteer work for you if you would like to meet Americans. This could be something simple such as visiting elderly people in a nursing home, just to chat with them. You could join or work for a charity, or go along with your local church.