Of Me I Sing: Americans Construct An Opt-Out Society

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Americans want to go their own way.

The right of individuals to question authority is one of the strongest facets of American life. But the ability to strike out on your own has always been balanced against the need for communal action in a complicated, continental country.

Right now, the pendulum is swinging more toward individualism.

"Individualism and self-reliance — that's one of the core values that people share," says Wayne Baker, author of the new bookUnited America. "That has been a major thread throughout all of American history, almost a constant."

The current strain of individualism extends far beyond the familiar distrust of Washington and political polarization, affecting choices in education, economic activity and medical care, among other areas.

"It's a reaction to the phrase we've heard repeatedly from President Obama, and before from Bill Clinton, that we're all in this together," says Roger Pilon, director of the Center for Constitutional Studies at the Cato Institute, a libertarian-leaning think tank.

"The problem with this phrase is, if we're all in this together, we can't go our separate ways," he says.

Opting Out Of Tests

Americans are presented with so many choices that perhaps it's only natural they would come to regard official positions as suspect — as just one of many possibilities, and not deserving of automatic support.

A group with the seemingly paradoxical name of United Opt Out National is holding a convention in Denver this weekend, encouraging parents to keep their children from taking standardized tests in school.

Such tests have proliferated over the past 15 years or so, used to judge the performance of schools and individual teachers. Some parents believe they do little to further the education of their own individual children, and so they are making noise about boycotting them in places like Chicago, Philadelphia and Waco, Texas.

So far, their numbers are small. But educators and policymakers who rely on the tests are starting to get nervous.

"It's probably true that the time spent on testing isn't going to be particularly beneficial to the kids, but it's very beneficial to the system," says Michael Petrilli, executive vice president of the Fordham Institute, an education think tank. "If you have enough people opt out of these tests, then you have removed some important information that could make our schools better."

But if parents believe the tests are a waste of time and a source of stress for their kids, they should be able to skip them, says Tennessee state Rep. Gloria Johnson, sponsor of a bill to allow them to do just that.

"Here in Tennessee, we allow parents to opt out of sex ed class, we allow them to opt out of immunization, why should we not allow them to opt out of standardized tests?" Johnson asks.

The Selfish Gene

Many don't think it's a good idea to let parents pass on vaccinations. Such decisions have been blamed for outbreaks of whooping cough and measles.

"I'm not questioning the parents' motives — they think they're doing their best — but if everybody does that, or even 10 percent, then everybody's at risk," says Donna Dickenson, an emeritus professor of medical ethics and humanities at the University of London.

Dickenson argues that the great advances in life expectancy over the past century have been due to programs and policies that are communal in nature — not just vaccinations, but improvements in infrastructure such as sewage.

"You can see that in the way the top 10 causes of death have changed from mostly being infectious diseases to diseases you mostly get as an individual, like cancer and heart disease," she says.

In her 2013 book, *Me Medicine vs. We Medicine: Reclaiming Biotechnology for the Common Good*, Dickenson argues that an excess of resources and treatments are being devoted to the problems of individuals, with customized care available in everything from genetics to cancer.

Many health products have the title "me" or "I" right in their very names.

We, The People

What Dickenson describes as America's "individualistic culture" is much on display in politics and culture. Libertarianism is growing in popularity, while unions, which have been in decline for decades, remain under attack. Government credibility has sunk to new lows, thanks to a combination of gridlock and unpopular policies.

"We've had the argument from the very beginning," says Pilon, the Cato scholar. "Right in our founding document, we have the contrast between the collective undertaking and the purpose of it, to secure [individual] liberty."

As seen with the ongoing backlash against the Affordable Care Act — and even the Supreme Court argument this week about the requirement that employer-sponsored insurance pay for contraceptives — many Americans are wary about government intrusion.

"Anything that's collective, they find imposing," says Amitai Etzioni, director of the Institute for Communitarian Policy Studies at George Washington University.

"Twenty-eight percent of Americans support both the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street," he says. "They're very angry, and for very good reason."

Older Institutions In Decline

Americans consume separate media — recall how quaint it was when Bruce Springsteen sang about "57 channels" and thought that was a lot — and increasingly live in like-minded communities, finding neighbors that not only resemble them economically and socially, but vote in similar ways.

"It's clear that Americans interact with one another, particularly from a different social class or income category, less than they once did," says David Campbell, a Notre Dame political scientist and co-author of *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us.*

Campbell says that with old forms of social capital — voluntary organizations such as Kiwanis and Rotary — in decline, people naturally to see themselves as less connected generally to society.

But Baker, a sociologist who teaches management at the University of Michigan, doesn't buy it. He says that Americans may no longer belong as frequently to traditional social groups, but have found new ties through technology.

"The old forms are declining, but there are new forms that are on the ascendancy," he says.

Limits To Self-Reliance

That's true even among people who expressly drop out of key parts of U.S. society. The vast majority of Americans still send their children to public schools, but those who home school are well-connected, constantly meeting at conferences and in support groups.

"They definitely have a community, it's just not the one at the schools that their kids are forced to attend," says Brian Ray, president of the National Home Education Research Institute.

That raises an interesting question: Do we define community as the people who happen to live within a small radius of our homes, or as people we identify with because of shared values, status and interests?

People naturally are drawn to find others who share their passions and beliefs. But to the extent people view institutions suspiciously, with some being for "us" and some for "them," that creates problems for the nation acting as a whole, argues Damon Silvers, policy director for the AFL-CIO, the nation's largest federation of unions.

"We are a country and society where people make up their own minds, where people have a place to stand against arbitrary authorities," he says. "But, by the way, you can never do it on your own.There's no way to do it with you fixing your infrastructure and me fixing mine."