

## Americans are more liberal and tolerant than ever. Too bad about their institutions

By Doug Saunders

June 30, 2022

As we await the fireworks south of the border this Fourth of July weekend, let's show some appreciation for Americans, and for the extraordinary progress, they've made. The American people, that is. Not their public institutions, which have somehow gone far in the opposite direction and currently pose a danger to those 330 million people.

Throughout this century, a growing majority of Americans have become dramatically more liberal in their views and politics, more tolerant, less distrustful of outsiders and difference, and less prone to crime and violence.

As recently as 2016, according to [surveys](#) by the Pew Research Center, a majority said that in order to be "truly American," it was necessary to be a Christian and be born in the United States. Today, for the first time, a majority of Americans – 65 per cent – feel that foreign-born or non-Christian neighbours are just as American as anyone else.

Likewise, in the 1990s, 65 per cent of Americans felt immigration should be decreased, [according to](#) the Cato Institute; today, it's only 33 per cent, and only 9 per cent feel there should be none. A majority now believe that immigrants come to America to improve things, and that their ability to immigrate should be a human right.

The belief that people of the same sex should be allowed to marry – a good indicator of wider tolerance – was held by only 27 per cent of Americans at the end of the 20th century, according to [annual Gallup polls](#); today, it has hit 70 per cent, including a majority of Republican Party voters and of seniors.

As recently as the 1990s, a majority of American households owned a firearm. [As of 2016](#), only 36 per cent had a gun, the lowest rate of firearm ownership in U.S. history. This is reflected in support for gun control: 70 per cent of Americans feel that restricting gun ownership should take precedence over gun rights.

Violent crime reached a postwar peak in 1991, at almost 760 incidents per 100,000 Americans. By the 2010s, it had plummeted to 360. It rose very slightly during the pandemic, to about 400, but is now falling again. Partly as a consequence, the U.S. incarceration rate [has fallen to](#) its lowest point since the mid-1990s.

Those aren't cherry-picked figures: It is hard to find any area of values or beliefs where Americans haven't become sharply more liberal. The New York University sociologist Michael Hout recently [examined](#) 50 years of surveyed attitudes and beliefs around 283 issues, and found that on only 5 per cent of issues had Americans become more conservative. They became more liberal on the big ones: racial tolerance, the rights of homosexuals, women, religious minorities and atheists.

Americans have become similar to Europeans in their policy views. For example, strong majorities (and even majorities of Republicans) [support](#) paid maternity leave and government-funded child care.

On the headline issue of abortion, Americans have [become a strong consensus nation](#): As of this year, a record-low 13 per cent [say](#) abortion should be illegal, and between 63 and 72 per cent support the 1973 Supreme Court ruling *Roe v. Wade*, which held that governments cannot interfere in the medical choices of women.

Here we see the problem Americans face: As a big majority of them have become more tolerant, their governing and legal institutions have been captured by a fringe minority who are very much not so. It's as if the overall climate has improved, but today's weather is terrible.

Even though most voting Americans say they lean toward the Democratic Party, and the Republicans have not had enough voter support to win a presidential majority since 2004, the Supreme Court has become packed with a majority of justices, from a fringe circle rarely recognized by mainstream legal scholarship, who were appointed by Republicans.

That's led to the catastrophic recent decisions that have contradicted not only conventional readings of the Constitution but the beliefs of most Americans. The decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade*. The decision to strike down New York's restrictions on the outdoor carrying of firearms. The decision to allow required prayer in school settings, in spite of a Constitution that explicitly forbids a state role in religion.

It's led to a Congress, held by a Democratic majority, that's unable to respond by passing laws, because too much geography – rather than population – has been captured by this minority.

This growing disjunction cannot hold. The collision will more likely happen peacefully: The majority will soon be large enough to prevent that fringe from capturing appointments and seats.

But as we saw in this week's congressional hearings into the Jan. 6, 2021, coup attempt on Capitol Hill, it does not take much for members of that fringe to turn to violent ends – especially at moments when they realize that the American people are not remotely on their side.

