

**Cultural Policy 101:  
Demystifying the US Cultural Policy  
Ecosystem**

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# Cultural Policy 101:

## Demystifying the US Cultural Policy Ecosystem

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## Introduction

Global familiarity with American popular culture has led to some widely held misconceptions about American cultural values and the US's unique cultural policy system. These notions include:

- Myth 1:** [The absence of a cultural ministry indicates that the United States does not value culture and does not take it seriously.](#)
- Myth 2:** [The National Endowment for the Arts \(NEA\) is the \*de facto\* Ministry of Culture.](#)
- Myth 3:** [The United States does not have national cultural policies.](#)
- Myth 4:** [Private and foundation investments in arts and culture are the prime source of income for the arts and cultural sector and provide more than a sufficient source of support.](#)
- Myth 5:** [Exported cultural products represent American cultural values and international cultural policy priorities.](#)

These myths represent misunderstandings about how the national, regional, local, and private sector participate in the American cultural ecosystem as well as how the United States hopes to position itself internationally. In reality, the United States has a decentralized system of cultural policy management that provides the guideposts to a cultural ecosystem designed to foster diversity through partnerships with key stakeholders in the states, local communities and the private and nonprofit sectors.

- Myth 1:** **The absence of a cultural ministry indicates that the United States does not value culture and does not take it seriously.**

Contrary to the belief that the absence of a federal cultural department or ministry signals that the US does not value culture, the decentralized system reflects a high regard for the integrity of culture and the importance of preventing government from interfering in an arena considered private. Americans have a historic mistrust of government interference in private life and many of the most controversial and politically divisive issues within the United States, such as [stem cell research](#), [media consolidation](#), [prayer in schools](#), [abortion](#), [gay marriage](#), and [immigration](#), have cultural implications and are fundamentally a discussion about the proper balance between government and citizens' rights.

It is the rationale that a centralized government department would ultimately censor freedom and expression that has prevented the US from creating such an institution although the debate over the need for a "cultural ministry" does resurface periodically. Additionally, the United States does not sponsor a [national cultural portal](#) or a [cultural observatory](#). However, the United States government does invest in the arts and culture through other mechanisms and models with a focus on partnerships and diversity. Thus, American cultural policy is made at the federal, state and local level and the ecosystem represents multiple collaborations between the government, academia, civil society, foundations and the private sector. In the years between 1989-1992 this system was questioned with the eruption of bitter "[Culture Wars](#)" where debates

over “obscene art” resulted in calls for the National Endowments for the Arts and the Humanities ([NEA](#) & [NEH](#)) to be dismantled. Today the most prominent public policies relating to culture concern [arts education](#), the [creative sector](#), [demographic change](#), [immigration](#), [intellectual property](#), [media consolidation](#), and [public diplomacy](#).

### *Constitutional Values & Identity*

The United States has none of the traditional nation-state characteristics such as an official national culture, ethnicity, language or religion. American citizens and residents, despite a Puritanical and individualistic legacy, a common language of English<sup>1</sup> and a primarily Protestant faith, are bound not by a shared culture but rather by shared ideals. America was founded on the principles of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, the desire for [freedom and democratic participation](#), and the separation of church and state.<sup>2</sup> Its national ideals are built around the idea that the US is a “nation of immigrants” where in theory there is “liberty and justice for all.” The US now has the third largest population in the world with over 300 million people, of which [36 million \(12%\) are foreign born](#), who speak over [322 languages](#),

The 1787 [Constitution](#), amended 27 times, establishes a separation of powers between the [Executive](#), [Legislative](#) and [Judiciary branches](#) and is the guiding document for all legislation and laws. All powers not enumerated in the Constitution are reserved to the people and the states through the [Tenth Amendment](#). The Constitution itself includes copyright protection for creators but subsequent amendments have also had significant impacts on cultural expression and cultural life in the US. In particular, it is the First Amendment that articulates the cornerstones of American cultural values and rights but several other amendments listed below also affect cultural rights and citizen participation.

- [First Amendment](#) – Freedom of religion, press, assembly and the right to petition grievances (1791)
- [Thirteenth Amendment](#) – Abolishment of slavery (1865)
- [Fifteenth Amendment](#) – Voting rights are extended to all male citizens regardless of race (1870)
- [Nineteenth Amendment](#) – Women's [suffrage](#). (1920)<sup>3</sup>

### **Myth 2: The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) is the *de facto* Ministry of Culture.**

In comparison to other cultural policy systems, it is difficult to identify a primary American cultural policy representative. In practice it is often the well-known National Endowment of the Arts ([NEA](#)) that is perceived as the *de facto* US federal government department/ministry of culture. The NEA, like its sister the [NEH](#), was created in 1965 not as a federal department but as a semi-autonomous agency reinforcing the British tradition of an “arms length” federal approach to investment and management of the arts and culture. While the NEA and its Chairman do often represent the US internationally so do representatives from other cultural agencies and institutions including the [Library of Congress](#). The NEA cannot be

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<sup>1</sup> The *Voting Rights Act* does require bilingual ballots in some jurisdictions

<sup>2</sup> Since 1936, the National [Census has not surveyed](#) religion because it was deemed as interference in the separation of church and state.

<sup>3</sup> The [Equal Rights Amendment](#) was proposed in 1923 but was never ratified.

equated to a ministry or minister of culture because the agency's purview is not as broad and proportionally its budget is the smallest of all the US cultural agencies. Management of culture at the national level is interwoven between numerous federal independent agencies and Cabinet Departments responsible for over 200 specific initiatives and programs that support the arts and culture.<sup>4</sup> Priorities and programs are guided by federally enacted legislation and challenges are interpreted through the court system. For more information on the major federal departments, agencies, and bodies who implement arts and cultural programs please view the [Select Federal Management of Culture in the U.S. Government](#) chart.

### **Myth 3: The United States does not have national cultural policies**

The United States does not have national cultural policies as traditionally understood to support the identity of a nation-state. Furthermore, before 1996 the phrase “cultural policy” was not utilized in US public policy discourse. However, since the founding of the United States there have been policies created on the federal, state, and local level, often interdisciplinary in nature, that intersect with culture and thus can be considered *cultural policies*. For example, federal tax exemptions (discussed more fully in Myth 4) are extremely important (although indirect) federal policies that have significant implications for cultural support. Although it is often perceived that the most effective initiatives occur on the state and local levels, it is national legislation that facilitates and provides the framework, values, and regulations that create the environment in which all other culturally related initiatives and programs must operate. A useful framework to conceptualise what types of policies impact the cultural ecosystem and thus could be classified as *cultural policies* was developed by the [Center for Arts & Culture](#). Below are the seven issue areas along with hyperlinked examples of national cultural policy relevant issues and initiatives under each category.<sup>5</sup>

- **Access & Equity:** [net neutrality](#), [Title IX](#), [digital divide](#), [media consolidation](#), [affirmative action](#), [creative commons](#);
- **Community:** arts participation, demographics, cultural plans and local initiatives, immigration, and urban renewal;
- **Education and the Creative Workforce:** [arts education](#), [bilingual education](#), creative sector and the [creative class](#), [No Child Left Behind](#), [performing arts](#), [Creative Campus Initiative](#);
- **International & Globalization:** [cultural/public diplomacy](#), immigration, cultural diversity, [Fulbright Program](#), [artist \(J-1\) visa requirements](#), [cultural rights](#);
- **Investment:** [tax policies](#), grants, charitable contributions, authorizing legislation for cultural agencies;
- **Law:** [copyright](#), digital & [intellectual property](#), role of [religion in public life](#);
- **Preservation:** tangible and [intangible heritage](#), [Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act](#), [Save America's Treasures](#).

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<sup>4</sup> Cowen, Tyler. [How the U.S. Funds the Arts](#). National Endowment for the Arts. Washington, DC: 2005. pp. 8.

<sup>5</sup> In comparison to other countries, the creative/copyright/entertainment industries are not regarded as a specific cultural policy file. However, they are most often categorized under *Access & Equity*, *Law*, or the *Creative Workforce*.

## ***The Federal Framework: Fostering Partnerships & Diversity***

Federal laws and initiatives, although not designed to establish a national cultural policy or cultural identity, do lay the framework for a system intended to foster collaboration and diversity through horizontal and vertical federal, multilateral, and public-private partnerships. Direct federal funding for arts and culture is disbursed through the NEA, the NEH, the Institute for Museum and Library Sciences (IMLS) and the [National Park Service](#) within the [Department of the Interior](#) and is often used to leverage additional funding through matching or 1:1 grants which serve to legitimize and raise awareness of specific projects.

Two key initiatives that illustrate how federal goals are implemented on the local level are the *Save America's Treasures* (SAT) and the *Preserve America* partnerships. *Save America's Treasures*, created in 1999 as a White House Millennium Council Initiative, was designed to leverage resources for local preservation projects through a partnership between the [National Trust for Historic Preservation](#) (a non-profit non-governmental organization) and federal cultural agencies. Between fiscal year (FY) 1999 through FY 2005, the initiative has contributed over \$233 million to over 800 projects. In 2005 alone, five federal agencies (the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities {PCAH}, NEA, NEH, and IMLS led by the National Park Service) distributed [\\$14.89 million in grants](#) requiring a 1:1 match to [61 SAT projects in 29 states](#). *Preserve America*, was created in 2001 as a [White House](#) initiative and mirrors the Save America's Treasures model of public and private partnerships. It is implemented in cooperation with the [Advisory Council on Historic Preservation](#) and in partnership with (7) US Departments: [Agriculture](#), [Commerce](#), [Defense](#), [Education](#), Housing and Urban Development ([HUD](#)), Interior, and [Transportation](#), as well as the NEH, the PCAH, and the [President's Council on Environmental Quality](#). The initiative reinforces the federal role as a leader in preserving and enhancing governmental-owned historic properties for economic development, cultural tourism, and the public's benefit through state, local, tribal and private sector-partnerships. In 2006, Preserve America disbursed almost [\\$5 million USD in matching grants to 68 projects in 33 states](#).

### ***Cultural Policy at the State and Local Levels***

In 2006, federal, state and local funding contributed [\\$1.23 billion \(about \\$4.11 per capita\)](#)<sup>6</sup> to the arts sector. However, federal support only provides about 2% of this funding with the majority of government financial support given by the state and local levels. Since 2002, when state arts agency appropriations began to plummet from a high of \$450.1 million in 2001 to a low of \$281.1 million in 2004, state investments have risen to [\\$327.5 million USD in 2006 \(about \\$1.09 per capita representing .49% of total state expenditures.\)](#)

On the local level, communities are embracing culture as a component of a more holistic approach to governance and meeting community needs. Cities and regions are creating development plans that build on the benefits of [culture to community health](#) derived from the creative sector and cultural tourism in such places as [Austin](#), [Nashville](#), [Philadelphia](#), the states

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<sup>6</sup> Barsdate, Kelly. [Public Funding for the Arts: 2006 Update](#). *Grantmakers in the Arts Reader*. September 2006. pp. 45.

of [Louisiana](#) and [Maine](#), and the region of [New England](#). Hence, Richard Florida's concept of the [creative class](#) and its economic and social advantages to communities has resonated at the local level and cities like [Santa Fe](#) are embracing the identity of a *creative city*. Advocacy groups like [Americans for the Arts](#) have measured [creative industry](#) contributions derived through [Dun and Bradstreet](#) data (which under represents nonprofit arts) to identify the [economic impact of the arts](#) by [congressional district](#). The National Association of State Arts Agencies ([NASAA](#)) has a [Creative Economy Resource Center](#) that spotlights local creative economy initiatives. These have proved to be invaluable advocacy tools and are extremely seductive as they provide measurable indicators linking the arts and culture to tourism and economic value. For example, collected statistics show that in 2002 the nonprofit *arts* sector contributed a total of [\\$134 billion USD](#) and the "copyright" industries contributed [\\$626.2 billion USD to the economy](#).

**Myth 4: Private and foundation investments in arts and culture are the prime source of income for the arts and cultural sector and provide more than a sufficient source of support.**

The US is known for its policy of exempting charitable contributions (up to 50% of income for individuals; 10% for corporations) from taxation as established through the 1917 *Tax Revenue Act*, a privilege extended to corporations through the *Gift Tax Act of 1932*. As the building blocks of US charitable giving, these laws provide incentives and an indirect subsidization of personal investment in nonprofit activities in which 67% of Americans participate<sup>7</sup>.

Historically, many individuals and [private foundations](#) have taken advantage of these policies and have contributed greatly to the arts and culture. However, philanthropy is just one source of support for cultural organizations. It is estimated that in recent years, 50% of nonprofit arts and cultural sector income has been raised not from contributions but from earned income (publication and ticket sales, membership fees and fundraising events) making it the prime source of support. In comparison, private sector philanthropy [individuals (35.5%), corporations (2.5%), foundations (5.0%)], while still a major source of support, represents less than half (43%) of nonprofits *arts* organizations' current revenue. Governmental support from federal, state, and local sources (7%) makes up the difference.<sup>8</sup>

Total private sector philanthropy contributions to the *arts, culture and humanities* continue to be significant and have risen steadily ([in 2005 they were \\$2.6 billion](#),<sup>9</sup>) but the percentage of these contributions to overall foundation giving has declined and currently represents about 5% (\$13.5 billion in 2005) of all foundation giving. Individual cultural contributions have taken a parallel downward spiral from [8.1% to 5.2% of total philanthropic contributions](#).<sup>10</sup> Since 1992, philanthropic giving to the *arts* has dropped from 8.4 to 5.2 % of total giving reflecting a theoretical loss of \$8 billion annually to the field.<sup>11</sup> Although trends do

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<sup>7</sup> Godfrey, Marion. *The Future of Private Giving to the Arts in America*. Americans for the Arts. October 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Godfrey, Marion. *The Future of Private Giving to the Arts in America*. Americans for the Arts. October 2006. pp. 7.

<sup>9</sup> Renz, Loren and Atienza, Josefina. [Foundation Funding for Arts Education: An Overview of Recent Trends](#) Grantmakers in the Arts. October 2005. pp. 38.

<sup>10</sup> Russell, Jacob Hale. [Hunger vs. the Arts](#). Wall Street Journal. October 14, 2006.

<sup>11</sup> Godfrey, Marion. *The Future of Private Giving to the Arts in America*. Americans for the Arts. October 2006. pp. 4.

show that support for the field comes from more diverse sources than in the 1990's, many new foundations built on the profits of innovation like the [Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation](#) do not fund arts and culture, instead preferring to invest in health-related programs.

In particular, 2002 was a watershed year: the stock market crashed taking with it a large proportion of many foundations' assets; a new Executive Order was introduced requiring foundations to vouch that all grant recipients were not affiliated with terrorist organizations or funds; and the [Sarbanes-Oxley Act](#) instituted stricter ethical and management practices for corporations that were adopted by many private charitable foundations. All of these factors contributed to a growing reluctance to invest in culture on a broad and national level, and many foundations reprioritized and decided to refocus their efforts more locally. This trend is reflected in figures indicating that community and family foundations contribute larger portions to the arts than do larger corporations or household contributions.<sup>12</sup>

While philanthropy remains a significant force in supporting the nonprofit arts and cultural sector, its role as the primary contributor is changing. As a result of these changing trends in philanthropy, the nonprofit arts and cultural sector must not only educate a new generation of donors but each organization will have to continue to diversify income, be creative in finding revenue streams to support their work and find effective indicators and evaluation tools to benchmark impact.

**Myth 5: Exported cultural products represent American cultural values and international cultural policy priorities.**

### *Exporting Culture*

When the US uses the term *exporting culture*, it is usually in reference not to the export of cultural goods and services through trade but rather to a component of cultural diplomacy based on citizen exchanges and the promotion of American performing arts. In fact, popular culture is often considered to promote a negative perception of American life because the quality of mass media exports does not usually reflect the "best" of American culture as found in the traditional disciplines of literature, dance, theater, music, visual arts, architecture and design.

Following September 11, 2001, the United States has reinvigorated its public diplomacy initiatives, which were de-emphasized during the post-[Cold War](#) period when the United States Information Agency ([USIA](#)) was incorporated into the State Department in 1999. While in the past the US's public diplomacy efforts were considered synonymous with propaganda tactics, a perception that lingers abroad, public and cultural diplomacy has evolved to include and emphasize a means of fostering mutual understanding and the reinforcement of a common humanity.

During the Cold War, public diplomacy focused on both elites and the public masses and included such initiatives as [Voice of America](#), a multimedia international broadcasting service launched in 1942, the 1946 [Fulbright Program](#) for citizen cultural exchanges, the 1964 [Arts in Embassies Program](#) showcasing American art in embassies abroad, and the American Centers

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

/Corners which often included open access to information (many of which have since been closed.) Since 9-11, there has been a shift to address the Arab and Muslim world and its youth and new [cultural representative programs](#) have been introduced.

In the US, exporting culture is not considered to be synonymous with exporting entertainment and the country uses its own terminology when discussing cultural diversity and creative industry related issues. As a result, cultural exemptions in trade accords have proved to be a divisive issue between the United States and some of its closest neighbors and allies. It is the US's historic conceptual definition that focuses on *entertainment* along with its defense of free trade that has created tension between the US and other countries seeking to carve out a market share for their own cultural voices. Within the United States there has been a paradigm shift from the idea of the "entertainment" industries to the concept of "[copyright industries](#)," seen as a "creator" right, to refer to printing, publishing, audiovisual, multimedia, crafts, and design works. However, the US still holds firm to the belief that these industries are best regulated through market forces with individual consumers determining success.

### *International Priorities*

US international cultural policy priorities are centered around education, preservation, the free flow of information and intellectual property rights. The United States was a founding member of the United Nations Education, Science, and Cultural Organization ([UNESCO](#)), the main international cultural policy related organization, but withdrew in 1984 in protest over mismanagement and programs believed to contradict American values (specifically freedom of the press.) In 2003, the US rejoined the organization and reinstated the [U.S. National Commission](#). This decision continues to be controversial especially because the US, by providing 22% of UNESCO's budget, is the largest investor. The US's [declared priorities at UNESCO](#), which include education and development, democracy and free flow of information, cultural preservation and exchange reflect domestic and international priorities.

Besides UNESCO, the US engages in other forums that consider cultural policy related issues including the World Trade Organization ([WTO](#)), the World Intellectual Property Organization ([WIPO](#)), and the Organization of American States ([OAS](#)). Representation is primarily provided by officials from the [State Department](#), accompanied by representatives from the various federal cultural agencies, departments, and offices that manage culture. Internationally, the US has shown particular commitment to education and preservation/heritage initiatives through participation in [UNESCO's World Heritage Sites Program](#), and through its [Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation](#) supporting global tangible and intangible heritage. Although the United States is not historically regarded as being a proponent of treaty commitments which might restrict its sovereign rights, it has signed [over 35 treaties](#) pertaining to cultural property, copyright and intellectual property, publications, telecommunications, migration, women and human rights. Notably, however, the United States has not signed the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* ([CEDAW](#)) nor did it vote for the [Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions](#) at UNESCO in 2005.

## On the Horizon:

### *Changing Demographics & Participation*

Changes in demographics are likely to provoke a renewed debate on language policies and citizenship rights as American communities become more diverse and the United States considers its current policies on immigration. The US continues to accept more [legal immigrants](#) than the rest of the countries of the world combined, however, traditional [immigration gateways and demographics are changing](#). As a result of globalization (and technology) many individuals are embracing both their own culture(s) as well as choosing to participate in artistic disciplines and consume goods and services not of their own heritage. The previous dominant diversity paradigm of a “melting pot” has gradually been replaced by the idea of “multiculturalism” or a “mosaic.” However, all of these perspectives limit both the individual sense of identity and a thoughtful response that government will have to take in reconsidering how Americans live together.

In parallel to the identity changes fostered by increased diversity and globalization are the combined effects, along with new technologies, on arts participation. The US takes a market-based approach to the consumption of culture, and new technologies as well as the Internet are allowing many creators and consumers to bypass traditional gate-keepers. Within the past few years, there have been several studies released ([2002 NEA Survey on Arts Participation](#), [Reggae to Rachmaninoff](#), [Arts Participation: Steps to Stronger Cultural and Community Life, U.S. Cultural Policy—Its Politics of Participation its Creative Potential](#)) that have examined cultural participation and audiences beyond traditional formats to include more community and commercial based types of participation and consumption.

### *Creative Sector*

Technological and demographic change and their implications for a viable creative sector, as traditional jobs are exported, have sparked a debate about how to foster creativity and innovation for new generations. Arts education is seen as essential both for these reasons and to foster arts appreciation amongst youth. Higher education academic institutions are now considering both their role in educating cultural workers as well as the benefits of [creative campus communities](#), an initiative spearheaded by the Association of Performing Arts Presenters ([APAP](#).) New strategies will continue to link arts and culture not only to education and creativity but to health initiatives as the cultural sector becomes more interdisciplinary in order to survive.

## Conclusions:

Examining the realities behind the myths is only a starting point in understanding the complex and decentralized American cultural policy ecosystem and the formal field of US cultural policy. In sum, the US cultural ecosystem has evolved from a history of suspicion towards federal authority and a cultural value system based on democracy and freedom, into a decentralized field of horizontal and vertical partnerships between the federal, state, and local levels as well as the private and civil society sectors. Despite the lack of an officially recognized national culture or centralized coordinating department, the US has created a culturally specific

system that upholds citizen's rights and fosters diversity. Cultural policy making in the US may seem passive and obtuse but only by understanding how the US system actually works can the ecosystem and its values, policies and initiatives be judged on their own merit.

Fundamentally, this complicated system has both advantages and disadvantages as articulated below.

***Disadvantages:***

- Cultural policy making can be interpreted as passive and reactive
- There are comparatively fewer multidisciplinary experts within the government
- It is more challenging to coordinate various stakeholders
- [Partnerships](#) often have insufficient resources and become ends in themselves
- The system is predicated on a free market mentality; cultural value is increasingly being linked to economic gains
- International representation for cultural policy related discussions is complicated

***Advantages:***

- The system fosters diversity and partnerships and encourages specialization
- Safeguards are provided against governmental censorship
- Flexibility is possible as there is no one institution or source of support
- It is more expressive of different viewpoints and not dominated by the federal level
- Cultural policy research comes from a variety of [independent sources](#)

Today there is a plethora of information available on the field from multiple academic, private and public sector sources that provide **more in-depth analysis** on the structure, impact and future directions of the American cultural policy system at all levels ([see All Resources.](#)) Changes in the way the ecosystem is funded will have considerable effect as non-profit organizations are challenged to find additional diverse sources of funding. As seductive as it is to link the cultural sector's value to economic indicators and values, this is a double-edged sword with the potential to ignore the other inherent benefits of participating in arts and culture. In the future, cultural policy will continue to become more important as the United States will need to expand its priorities beyond fostering partnerships and preserving the past to actively considering policies relating to identity, participation, the creative sector and the effects of technology.