

AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM?
POLICY AND POLITICS IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Why did the United States never develop a robust socialist tradition comparable to say France or Germany? Why is economic inequality so much greater in the U.S. than in almost every other advanced industrial democracy? Why does the United States stand virtually alone among western democracies in continuing to use capital punishment, and why does the U.S. have incarceration rates that are far higher than other industrial democracies? These and other similar questions (e.g., why no national health insurance in the U.S., why is the U.S. a welfare state “laggard”) are at the core of what social scientists and historians term “American exceptionalism.” In this course, we will explore the concept of American exceptionalism not as a normative claim (is America the best—or worst—in the world?) but as a sociological or empirical phenomenon. We will interrogate whether it is true that public policy in the United States differs fundamentally from policy in other western democracies. In what ways, if any, is the U.S. an outlier among western democracies, and in what ways does the United States resemble other democratic nations? To the extent that United States’ public policies are distinctive, what explains these differences? Is it the nation’s political institutions, and if so, which ones? Is it the separation of powers, federalism, or maybe the judiciary? Alternatively, does the key to the puzzle lie in the nation’s political culture and political ideology, particularly its liberal, anti-statist tradition? Or do the answers lie in America’s distinctive racial past or perhaps in its extraordinary religiosity? Or should we seek the answers instead in the “path-dependent” patterns of political development related to suffrage and state-building? We will also consider how the Trump presidency changes the way we think about American exceptionalism.

To help us answer these questions, we will read work by political scientists, historians, sociologists, legal scholars, and journalists. The books to be purchased are Sven Steinmo, *The Evolution of Modern States: Sweden, Japan, and the United States* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), Mark Morje Howard, *Unusually Cruel: Prisons, Punishment, and the Real American Exceptionalism* (Oxford University Press, 2017); Anu Partanen, *The Nordic Theory of Everything: In Search of a Better Life* (Harper 2016); and Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (Norton 1996). The other readings indicated in the syllabus are available on the class WISE page (except where a URL is provided on the syllabus).

The emphasis in this course is on close reading and discussion of texts. Because the course is discussion based, it is *imperative* that you do the reading for each class session. At times the reading is heavy, so it is incumbent upon each of you to manage your time wisely so that you are able to come to every class prepared to discuss the readings. Class participation will figure heavily (30 percent) in your final grade. The other major requirements for the course are a take-home essay due March 18 (worth 30 percent of your grade) and a final paper due May 6 at 5pm (worth 40 percent),

This course will be entirely remote and you are required to have your video on during class as it is critically important to the success of a discussion-based class that we all can see each other. You should also be sure to use “gallery view” during class. If for some reason, technological or otherwise, you are not able to have your video on during a given class period, you should notify me of that fact before or during class.

Please inform me about any disabilities that will affect your participation in this course and any accommodations authorized by the Office of Disabilities Services. I expect you to be familiar with Willamette's Plagiarism and Cheating Policy, which is available at http://www.willamette.edu/cla/catalog/resources/policies/plagiarism_cheating.php.

My office hours this semester are by appointment. Just email me (rellis@willamette.edu) and I will be happy to set up a time to meet on Zoom.

Schedule of Class Topics and Readings

I. Contemporary Concerns

1.1 (Jan 21) Introduction

Partanen, *The Nordic Theory of Everything*, 11-45 (chap. 1, "In the Land of the Free: Becoming American")

Niraj Chokshi, Norway is No. 1 in Happiness. The US, Sadly, is No. 14," *New York Times*, March 20 2017

Nichols Kristof, "We're No. 28! And Dropping!" *New York Times*, September 29, 2020

2.1 (Jan 26) The US Response to COVID-19 in Cross-National Perspective

Uri Friedman, "Why America Resists Learning from Other Countries," *The Atlantic*, May 14 2020

Wade Davis, "The Unraveling of America," *Rolling Stone*, August 6, 2020

David Leonhardt, "The Unique U.S. Failure to Control the Virus," *New York Times*, August 8 2020

Michael Ollove, "How Misinformation, Federalism, and Selfishness Hampered America's Virus Response," *PEW*, August 18, 2020, <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/blogs/stateline/2020/08/18/how-misinformation-federalism-and-selfishness-hampered-americas-virus-response>

Fareed Zakaria, "American exceptionalism has become a hazard to our health," *Washington Post*, September 17, 2020

Emma Reynolds, "As schools shut across the US, Europe made it a mission to keep them open," *CNN.com*, November 13, 2020

James Palmer, "Why the United States Can't Defeat the Coronavirus," *Foreign Policy*, November 18, 2020

2.2 (Jan. 28) Anti-Vaxxers: A Cross-National Perspective

Hannah Ritchie and Samantha Vanderslott, "How Many People Support Vaccination across the World," Our World in Data, August 1, 2019, <https://ourworldindata.org/support-for-vaccination>

Nadine Sayegh, "Europe's anti-vaxxers could lead to a public health crisis," *trtworld.com*, Nov. 15, 2019

Loveday Morris and William Glucroft, "Prospect of a coronavirus vaccine unites anti-vaxxers, conspiracy theorists, and hippie moms in Germany," *Washington Post*, July 3, 2020

Emily Rauhala, "The pandemic is amplifying the U.S. anti-vaccine movement—and globalizing it," *Washington Post*, October 27, 2020

Marie Fly Lindholt et al., "Willingness to Use an Approved COVID-19 Vaccine: Cross-National Evidence of Levels and Individual-Level Predictors," Aarhus School of Business and Social Sciences, November 27, 2020

- 3.1 (Feb. 2) (Why) Are we Exceptionally Polarized? Is the Republican Party Exceptional?
 Michael Dimock and Richard Wike, "America is exceptional in the nature of its political divide,"
 Pew Research Center FactTank, November 13, 2020
- Noam Gidron, James Adams, and Will Horne, "Americans Hate the 'Other Side' in Politics. But
 so do Europeans," *Washington Post*, November 6, 2020
- Thomas Carothers and Andrew O'Donohue, "How Americans Were Driven to Extremes, In the
 United States, Polarization Runs Particularly Deep," *Foreign Affairs*, September 25, 2019
- Zack Beauchamp, "The Republican Party is an Authoritarian Outlier," *Vox.com*, September 22,
 2020
- Anna Luhrmann et al., "New Global Data on Political Parties," V-Dem Institute, Briefing Paper,
 October 2020
- Noah Gidron and Daniel Ziblatt, "Center-Right Political Parties in Advanced Democracies,"
Annual Review of Political Science (2019), 17-35
- 3.2 (Feb. 4) Trump, Populism, and Democratic Distress in Comparative Perspective
 Saskia Brechenmacher, "Comparing Democratic Distress in the United States and Europe,"
 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 2018
- Todd Donovan and David Redlawsk, Donald Trump and Right-wing Populists in Comparative
 Perspective," *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion, and Parties* (2018), 190-207
- Carlos Lozada, "Samuel Huntington, a prophet for the Trump era," *Washington Post*, July 18,
 2017.

II. The Classic Questions

- 4.1 (Feb. 9) The Concept of American Exceptionalism
 Terrence McCoy, "How Joseph Stalin Invented American Exceptionalism," *The Atlantic*, March
 15 2012
- Lipset, *American Exceptionalism*, 13-76
- Richard Wike, "5 Ways Americans and Europeans are Different," Pew Research Center
 FactTank, April 19, 2016
- 4.2 (Feb. 11) Is it the Culture or Institutions?
 Sven Steinmo, "American Exceptionalism Reconsidered: Culture or Institutions?" in
 Lawrence C. Dodd and Calvin Jillson, eds., *The Dynamics of American Politics:
 Approaches and Interpretations* (Westview Press, 1994), 106-131
- 5.1 (Feb. 16) Why no Socialism in the United States?
 Lipset, *American Exceptionalism*, 77-109
- Steven Erlanger, "What's a Socialist?" *New York Times*, June 30, 2012
- 2019 Manifesto of Party of European Socialists (PES), "A New Social Contract for Europe"
- 2016 New Democratic Party (NDP) of Canada) Statement of Policy
- 2020 Democratic Party Platform, <https://www.demconvention.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/2020-07-31-Democratic-Party-Platform-For-Distribution.pdf>

5.2 (Feb. 18) Is the United States a Welfare State Laggard—and, if so, Why?
Daniel Beland and Jacob Hacker, “Ideas, Private Institutions and American Welfare State ‘Exceptionalism’: The Case of Health and Old-Age Insurance, 1915-1965,” *International Journal of Social Welfare* (2004), 42-54.
Peter Baldwin, *The Narcissism of Minor Differences: How America and Europe Are Alike* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 40-73
Suzanne Mettler, “Our Hidden Government Benefits,” *New York Times*, September 19, 2011

6.1 (Feb. 23) Why No Comprehensive National Health Insurance?
Sven Steinmo and Jon Watts, “It’s the Institutions, Stupid! Why Comprehensive National Health Insurance Fails in America,” *Journal of Health Politics, Policy, and Law* (1995), 329-72
Jonathan Cohn, “How They Did It,” *New Republic*, May 210, 2010
Partanen, *The Nordic Theory of Everything*, chap. 5 (167-232)
Dylan Scott, “9 Things Americans Needs to learn from the rest of the world’s health care system,” Vox.com, January 29 2020
“How does health spending in the U.S. compare to other countries?”
<https://www.healthsystemtracker.org/chart-collection/health-spending-u-s-compare-countries/>

6.2 (Feb. 25) Work, Vacation, Family, Inequality, and the American Dream
Partanen, *The Nordic Theory of Everything*, chaps 2-3, 7-9 (47-106, 263-329)
Mark Johanson, “Life in a No-Vacation Nation,” BBC.com, Nov. 6, 2014
Danielle Kurtzleben, “Lots of Other Countries Mandate Paid Leave. Why not the US?” NPR.org, July 15, 2015, <https://www.npr.org/sections/itsallpolitics/2015/07/15/422957640/lots-of-other-countries-mandate-paid-leave-why-not-the-us>

III. Divergence in a Globalizing World

7.1 (March 2) The Evolution of Modern States: The Case of Sweden
Steinmo, *The Evolution of Modern States*, 1-87

7.2 (March 4) The Evolution of Modern States: The Case of Japan
Steinmo, *The Evolution of Modern States*, 88-148
Lipset, *American Exceptionalism*, 211-263

8.1 (March 9) The Evolution of Modern States: The Case of the United States
Steinmo, *The Evolution of Modern States*, 149-233
Baldwin, *The Narcissism of Minor Differences*, 204-249

8.2 (March 11) The Case of Religion
Steven Pfaff, “Religious Divide: Why Religion Seems to Be Thriving in the United States and Waning in Europe,” in Jeffrey Kopstein and Sven Steinmo, eds., *Growing Apart: America and Europe in the 21st Century* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 24-52

9.1 (March 16): No class

9.2 (March 18) Paper 1 Due

IV. Unusually Cruel: Prisons, Policing and Punishment

10.1 (March 23) Sentencing and Prosecution

Howard, *Unusually Cruel*, 1-60

Heather Ann Thompson, "How Prisons Change the Balance of Power in America," *The Atlantic*, October 7, 2013

10.2 (March 25) "Mid-Semester" Day: No class

11.1 (March 30) Capital Punishment

Mark Lewis and Sarah Lyall, "Norway Mass Killer Gets the Maximum: 21 Years," *New York Times*, August 24, 2012

Carol S. Steiker, "Capital Punishment and American Exceptionalism," in Michael Ignatieff, ed., *American Exceptionalism and Human Rights* (Princeton University Press, 2005), 57-89

David Garland, *Peculiar Institution: America's Death Penalty in an Age of Abolition* (Harvard University Press, 2010), 9-24, 39-55, 308-313

Radley Balko, "The slow decline of the death penalty," *Washington Post*, August 16, 2016

11.2 (April 1) Prison Conditions

Howard, *Unusually Cruel*, 61-85

James Q. Whitman, "Introduction," in *Harsh Justice: Criminal Punishment and Widening Divide between America and Europe* (Oxford University Press, 2003), 3-17

12.1 (April 6) Treatment of Ex-Offenders

Howard, *Unusually Cruel*, 86-148

Mary Katzenstein, Leila Ibrahim, and Katharine D. Rubin, "Felony Disenfranchisement and the Dark Side of American Liberalism," *Perspectives on Politics* (Dec.2010), 1035-54

12.2 (April 8) Policing in Comparative and Historical Perspective

Jill LePore, "The Invention of the Police," *New Yorker*, July 13, 2020

Amelia Cheatham and Lindsay Maizland, "How Police Compare in Different Democracies," Council of Foreign Relations, November 12, 2020,

<https://www.cfr.org/backgrounders/how-police-compare-different-democracies>

Katrin Bennhold and Melissa Eddy, "In Germany, Confronting Shameful Legacy is Essential Part of Police Training," *New York Times*, June 23 2020

Joe Bish and Matt Taylor, "Trying to Explain the American Police to the British," *Vice.com*, April 20, 2015

Paul Hirschfield, "Why do American cops kill so many compared to European cops," *theconversation.com*, November 25, 2015

Yasmeen Serhan, "What the World Could Teach America About Policing," *The Atlantic*, June 10 2020

Gwen Prose and Vesla Weaver, "We listened to people in highly policed US communities: Here's what we learned," *Washington Post*, June 17, 2020

V. Other Varieties of American Exceptionalism

13.1 (April 13) Hate Speech and Racist Groups

Excerpts from Erik Bleich, *The Freedom to be Racist?: How the United States and Europe Struggle to Preserve Freedom and Combat Racism* (Oxford University Press, 2011)

Isaac Stanley-Becker and James McAuley, “‘We have drawn a different lesson from history’: How the world is reacting to violence in Charlottesville,” *Washington Post*, August 14, 2017

Bernard Rohleder, “Germany Set out to Delete Hate Speech,” *Washington Post*, February 20, 2018

13.2 (April 15) Disability Rights

Thomas F. Burke, “The European Union and the Diffusion of Disability Rights,” in Martin A. Levin and Martin Shapiro, eds., *Transatlantic Policymaking in Age of Austerity* (Georgetown University Press, 2004), 158-176

Cass R. Sunstein, “Why Does the American Constitution Lack Social and Economic Guarantees,” in Michael Ignatieff, ed., *American Exceptionalism and Human Rights* (Princeton University Press, 2005), 90-110

14.1 (April 20) No class

14.2 (April 22) Regulating Risk

David Vogel, *The Politics of Precaution: Regulating Health, Safety, and Environmental Risks in Europe and the United States* (Princeton University Press, 2012), 1-17, 22-102

15.1 (April 27): Education

Partanen, *The Nordic Theory of Everything*, chap 4 (107-166)

Colin Dailey, “What’s Inequality Got to Do with It,” American Educational Achievement in Comparative Perspective,” Willamette University, Politics Senior Thesis, April 30, 2008

Erin Thesing, “An American Teacher in Paris,” *Washington Post*, February 22, 2018.

15.2 (Apr 29) Soccer

Andrei Markovits and Steven Hellerman, *Offside: Soccer and American Exceptionalism* (Princeton University Press, 2001), 7-51