An American flag is shown flying against a clear blue sky. The flag is positioned vertically, with the top of the flag near the top of the frame and the bottom near the bottom. The stripes of the flag are clearly visible, and the flag appears to be waving in the wind. The background is a solid, deep blue.

# AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM REVISITED

US Political Development  
in Comparative Perspective

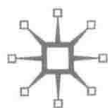
AXEL HADENIUS



AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM REVISITED  
US POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT IN  
COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Axel Hadenius

palgrave  
macmillan



AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM REVISITED  
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## CHAPTER 1



### INTRODUCTION

*In this opening chapter, I give an account of the way this work came about—how I found the approach that first inspired me being less fruitful and instead chose another angle to the basic question, which has to do with the special features that signify American political life.*

#### THE LIPSET ARGUMENT

This work was originally inspired by the renowned sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset, who published a book in the 1990s entitled *American Exceptionalism*. He had dealt with this theme in earlier writings, and here he summarized his arguments. Lipset was mainly focused on political culture, which has to do with attitudes and values held by the general public. In their political views, he found, Americans deviate—sometimes quite considerably—from the usual pattern in the Western world. The difference is particularly pronounced vis-à-vis Europeans, his main reference group.

In the main, Lipset reported, Americans are more inclined to hold individualistic views. They are more critical of government intervention, in the societal as well as in the private sphere. In their social and political outlook, Americans distinguish themselves by an egalitarian and antielitist stance. They are also more religious and morally oriented. More than half the US population regularly goes to church (or to a corresponding spiritual gathering). Overall, associational life is more developed than in any comparable country. Besides their religious activities, Americans are engaged in a broad spectrum of voluntary organizations. It may be a matter of charity work, sports activities, political action, cultural endeavors, or many other things. Americans further distinguish themselves by their strong sense of patriotism, which manifests itself in a great pride over their country and its institutions. Nowhere else is the constitution of a country held in such high (almost sacred) esteem as in the United States. Americans are also very optimistic, comparatively speaking, and strongly inclined to believe that you can improve

your conditions of life by your own efforts. In interviews, a strong majority typically concur with the statement that in America it is possible, through hard work, to improve your standing and fulfill your dreams.

As a consequence of the individualism that dominates American political culture, Lipset argued, the public sector in the United States has been given another role than elsewhere. The comprehensive welfare state found in many countries, particularly in Western Europe, has no counterpart in the United States. Social protection in America takes the form of private insurance to a far greater extent, and charity associations play a more important role. Hence, taxes are lower than in most West European countries, and the public sector is smaller. In line with this, the educational sector has by tradition been given top priority among public undertakings, Lipset pointed out. Education is seen as the prime means of individual improvement and of social mobility. No country allocates more resources to schools and to institutions of higher education and research. An unusually large share of the population has undergone some form of college and postgraduate education. Another side of the coin, Lipset noted, is the fact that crime rates are considerably higher in the United States. This holds for all types of crime, and especially for acts of violence. Few other countries have such a large share of their citizens locked up in jail. Sentencing is also relatively harsh, both in terms of time and in terms of degree. (Lipset 1997).

Lipset's account of the special attitudes prevailing in the United States has been verified by later investigations into these matters (Kopstein and Steinmo 2008; Cleggett and Shafter 2010). But at the same time, objections have been made to his sweeping statements about American exceptionalism. Among others, social historian Peter Baldwin has remarked that regarding criminality there are differences within Europe (between north and south, east and west) that are as striking as that between the United States and parts of Europe. And the same holds for the extent of public involvement in the social field. In many policy areas having to do with social care and living conditions, it has become mostly a matter of nuance when conditions on the two sides of the Atlantic are contrasted (Baldwin 2009).<sup>1</sup>

To a great extent I concur with this objection, especially as the situation in the United States has changed substantially since the time (up to the mid-1990s) that Lipset referred to. The public sector, which then was relatively small—and that according to Lipset's explanatory theory would remain at that level—has grown significantly. As a result, the United States has in many ways become more similar to other economically developed countries of the world. As we shall see in the inquiry that follows, the United States now has a public sector with the same prime orientation: The emphasis nowadays is strongly on the social side. Observers have often called attention to the fact that the United States—unlike practically all other countries in the Western world—lacked a system of comprehensive health insurance (Fabbrini 2007: 103f). But the situation has changed. In 2010, Congress decided to introduce a federal health program that includes the lion's share of citizens who were previously uninsured. The new program started operating in 2014.



As for social and economic circumstances more generally, the UN Human Development Index is commonly referred to when conditions in different countries are compared. This index combines measures of four different factors: life expectancy, literacy, education, and standard of living. The United States belongs—along with many other Western countries—to the group that is labeled “very high.” It comes out number 13 in a recent ranking, with an index value close behind that of Norway, Australia, Sweden, and France and just before that of New Zealand, Great Britain, and Germany. Another attribute that is often observed is the distribution of income. Here a ratio can be calculated, showing how much high-income people earn, compared with their low-income counterparts. Comparing conditions for the 10 percent of the population at the top with those for the 10 percent at the bottom, we find that the United States gets a score of 16; in other words, people in the highest bracket get 16 times more than those in the lowest bracket. For West European countries the corresponding figure is 9 on average (with Portugal and Britain highest, scoring 15 and 14, respectively). Other reference countries are Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, which like the United States have a British colonial background. These countries have a mean of 11 (with Australia highest, at 14). However, the difference in income distribution is greater by far among the neighboring countries of Latin America. Here the average score is 37 (UNDP: *Human Development Report* 2009 and 2011).

Hence, with regard to living conditions more generally, which are tapped by the Human Development Index, the United States cannot be seen as an outlier. In this respect it has much in common with the countries of Western Europe (and some of their far-flung offspring). This affinity is also manifested in great similarities in terms of lifestyle. The close ties are illustrated, moreover, by the high degree of commercial interaction. The member states of the European Union are by far the biggest US trading partner, accounting for almost half the country’s global exports (*Forbes*, August 8, 2013). Yet with regard to income distribution, the United States deviates from the main West European tendency. Seen in a broader perspective, however, it is a matter of a moderate deviation. In its distributional profile, the United States undoubtedly has more in common with West European countries (and with other former British colonies) than with its neighbors to the south of the Rio Grande.<sup>2</sup>

## ARGUMENT OF THIS BOOK

Given the objections that can be raised, the Lipset thesis—presuming a divergent American societal and policy model, grounded in a particular popular ethos—can hardly be deemed conclusive. Yet even as I object to his major proposal, I am inclined to support—and to emphasize even more in several respects—Lipset’s view in another field. I refer to his analysis of the characteristics that distinguish the American mode of government. This is also the field that will be the center of attention in this book. Lipset demonstrates that the political institutions and types of organizations that have developed

in the United States are special in many ways. He points in particular to the way that parties operate and elections are conducted. But his reports on these matters are generally rather brief and superficial. The focus of his analysis lies elsewhere.

After Lipset, not much has been written about the particular traits that mark American political life.<sup>3</sup> The exception is a book by Raymond Smith from 2007, with the illuminating title *American Anomaly*. Smith is mainly interested in various aspects of the separation of powers in America, and he makes several interesting comparative observations in that realm—particularly when contrasting the American system to the parliamentary model applied in Europe. But his account of the distinctive features of the American system is rather limited and in want overall of a historical perspective. Hence, he offers no analysis of how the special American institutions have emerged and developed.

My ambition in this book is to clarify the special features that have come to distinguish American political life. In this realm, I would maintain, the differences vis-à-vis the rest of the world are not marginal. In its form of government, the United States from the beginning was a country very much apart; and in many respects it remains so even today. Nevertheless—it should be noted as well—the picture is mixed. In certain respects, the differences have clearly diminished over time. In some areas, moreover, conditions in the United States are often presumed to be more deviant than they actually are.

More particularly, the following features of the United States system will be the object of analysis:

- The American constitution of 1789 stood out as a remarkable creation. Yet it has, with some amendments, been maintained up to this day. Since its beginnings, moreover, the country has experienced an unbroken tradition of civil, and increasingly democratic, rule. Accordingly, the United States is marked by a unique political stability.
- For a long time, the responsibilities of the central government in the United States were very limited. But then its action profile grew considerably. The federal structure in the country has not been much affected by this development, however.
- From the beginning, the United States has applied a special system whereby powers are divided between the legislature and the executive at the federal level. The relative weight of the organs in question has shifted over time. But the balance of powers has not disappeared; if anything, it has become more pronounced with time.
- Almost from the founding of the Republic, judicial institutions have had the authority to monitor and to reject political decisions. For many years this phenomenon was peculiar to the United States; in due course of time, however, a system of judicial oversight has come to be instituted in other countries also.
- The American two-party system—with Democrats and Republicans as the prime competitors—has lasted for over 150 years. This is unique. At the

same time, a particular American organizational structure has developed. Furthermore, a distinct increase in the programmatic coherence of the parties has taken place in recent decades—giving rise to strong polarization. This has resulted at times in a conspicuous lack of decision-making capacity.

- Elements of direct-democratic modes of decision making have been introduced. Among these, the primary elections—which is truly an American institutional innovation—have had a heavy political impact. During recent decades this electoral feature has been applied (in different forms) in several parts of the world.
- In the electoral realm, it is generally held that the United States stands out in terms of low turnout, a big incumbency advantage, and a significant effect of the great involvement of money. In certain respects, however, these perceptions need to be modified.

In the chapters that follow, I shall elucidate these factors more closely and situate them in comparative perspective. The approach will be thematic, focused on one aspect at a time. The period of study will stretch from the emergence of the Republic up to the present. Hence, a time span of more than two hundred years will be covered. My analysis of the early years will be mainly of a broad and sweeping character. Here my aim is just to illuminate the general trends of development. The picture will be more detailed when we come to recent times, especially the last few decades.

In my comparative analysis, the objects under scrutiny will vary somewhat according to the particular question at issue. In many cases, I will contrast the situation in the United States with that in Europe and Latin America. The selection of Europe (mainly Western Europe) is natural for the simple reason that, as I briefly illustrated above, this region displays many similarities with the United States in social and economic terms and has had far-reaching historical connections with it besides. The focus on Latin America is relevant mainly because most of the countries in that region apply an institutional system that was originally designed with the United States as a model. However, in some fields I make a different and often more restricted selection. One of these relates to federalism. In this realm, for one thing, the number of cases is limited (there are not so many federal states in the world). For another, I want to focus on cases where—as in the United States—this institutional arrangement has been maintained, and become rooted under democratic conditions, over a long period of time. I also make a special selection of comparative cases when issues relating to the function in different ways of the US electoral system is under study; here I concentrate on countries that apply a similar majoritarian electoral code.

Having said this, it is time to get started. We relocate ourselves, therefore, to the early phase, when the United States of America came into existence.



## CHAPTER 2



### THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA: A SPECIAL NEWCOMER AMONG STATES

*In this chapter, I give a brief overview of the process by which the United States came into being. I show that a special type of state was formed, with roots stretching back both to Europe and to the modes of governance developed in colonial times. Along the way, some basic traits of the new state are clarified.*

#### A NEW KIND OF REPUBLIC

The United States of today is certainly an exceptional political formation in many ways. And such were actually the conditions already from the start. The new state that was established was for its time a strange institutional creature. In the late eighteenth century, in a world dominated by royal rule, the rebellious Americans created a republic. The new Republic was also remarkable with respect to its form. Republics that had existed earlier in history were as a rule very small in size. Typical examples were the city-states in ancient times and in the Middle Ages; many of these republics were almost microscopic. Scholars in the field had maintained that a small scale was necessary for republican government. Charles de Montesquieu, the influential French nobleman of the eighteenth century, was a noted exponent of this view. Republican rule, he maintained, must be exercised in small units marked by a high degree of social coherence. Otherwise the state will fall apart, owing to strong internal tensions. The history of governments includes many instances of this unfortunate scenario.

But the new United States of America was a huge unit. Its territory was larger than England, France, and Prussia combined. In that respect, the United States stood out as a new entity. It is true that the ancient Roman Republic had been even larger, ultimately stretching from the Mediterranean

up to the Rhine. But this vast territory was actually governed from the city of Rome, which was ruled by its (free) citizenry.<sup>1</sup> The rest of Italy, as well as other areas ruled by Rome, had no say. Republican Rome was a city-state that had created an empire. In a similar vein, the city of Venice dominated the eastern part of the Mediterranean during the Middle Ages (Ferraro 2012). The different and special thing about the American republic was the fact that its large extension was not the consequence of an imperial model of government, where one part is superior and exerts control over the rest of the territory. All parts were in principal of equal standing. It was a matter of 13 former British colonial provinces that had revolted and decided to come together to form a federal state.

The federal order was by no means a novelty. The ancient city-states of Greece, for instance, had united in such a way for defense purposes. But the units thus created were fragile, and normally of brief duration. Then, in the Middle Ages, a number of city-states in and near Germany established an extensive network for the pursuit of common (trade-oriented) interests: the Hanseatic League. This federal arrangement was maintained over several centuries. But it was marred by want of geographical coherence, and by a low capacity for joint action. The federation had a representative assembly, the purpose of which was to foster coordination; but executive organs were lacking (Hadenius 2001: 158f; Poggi 1978: 37–39).

The Union of Utrecht—the prototype of the state known now as the Netherlands—deserves mention as well. It was formed by seven provinces in the sixteenth century. These provinces had previously been largely independent (nominally under foreign rulers). They decided to join forces, in order to protect themselves; and to that end they established a federation. But here as well, the executive arm of government was underdeveloped. In most fields of policy the provinces acted independently. Among other things, there was no central organ in command of the military forces. This weakness (together with mounting internal conflicts) set the stage for the downfall of the Union, when the country came under attack by Napoleon's France. Another state formation of a similar type suffered the same fate. I am referring to Switzerland, which since the end of the Middle Ages had been held together in a loose confederation which had originally been created in order to withstand Austrian hostilities (Gordon 2002: chs. 5–6; Downing 1992: ch. 9; Palmer 1959: ch. 11).

These two cases have one thing in common with the United States: The federal units had come into being through a process of internal amalgamation of previously independent entities, for the purpose of resisting colonial domination. But they differed with respect to governmental coherence. The early United States was also a federation of a very loose, confederative nature. Within a decade, however, conditions changed. The new US Constitution, which was drafted in 1787 and adopted two years later, reinforced the bonds between the units (the states), and strengthened the federal character of the union. Another difference vis-à-vis the early federal ventures in Europe is the fact that the American federation proved to be a lasting enterprise.

## DISTANT ROOTS—IN NEW SOIL

Another notable thing about the American Republic has to do with its special historical roots. It embodied a blend of several different ingredients. Some very old and distant impulses got mixed with new practices established on American ground.

On the one hand, the United States can be seen as a latter-day exponent (or remnant) of a special course of development that started in Europe in the Middle Ages. All around Europe, beginning in the twelfth century, constitutional charters were inaugurated, through contracts between kings and popular representatives. England's Magna Carta is an early and well-known example. These charters normally entailed a number of statutes protecting civil liberties and the rule of law. Furthermore, the establishment of parliamentary assemblies was often part of the agreement. Only the top strata of society were represented in most cases. In practice, moreover, the assemblies had only limited influence. But they had often a strong say in one vital area: To introduce new levies, the endorsement of the representative body was normally required. In many European countries, such constitutionalism and power-sharing were maintained for several hundred years (Downing 1992: ch. 2; Hintze 1975; Fukuyama 2011: chs. 18 and 22).

But by the latter part of the Middle Ages, this political order started to break down. Of the two parties that had been involved in power-sharing, it was the royal power that got the upper hand. In consequence, the parliamentary assemblies were weakened, or simply dissolved. At the same time, the constitutional rights that had previously been observed were eroded, or even discarded altogether. The new era was the time of absolute royal rule. Particularly in states such as Spain, France, and Prussia—all of which could be rated great European powers—this tendency was evident.

This development was the effect of a certain military-cum-political logic. New forms of warfare (based on guns and infantry) gave the advantage to those who could assemble great military units. This required a territorially large state and a centralized mode of decision making. To that end, obstacles like parliaments and judicial organs had to be abolished. Those princes who managed to accomplish such an institutional transition were the ones who were most successful on the battleground and in the struggle for power. Over a long period—up to the nineteenth century—this was the dominant political logic in Europe (Tilly 1975). Only in certain areas in the outskirts of Europe—which due to geographical factors were more easily defended from military intervention—could the old constitutional and parliamentary forms be essentially maintained. England is an example. In that country, protracted battles between king and parliament were fought in the seventeenth century. The outcome was the “Glorious Revolution” (1688), which had the effect of firmly anchoring constitutionalism and parliamentary rule in England (Downing 1992; Acemoglu and Robinson 2012).

This was the time when the colonization of North America got started. The new settlers came from Britain, and they continued to be subjects of the

British crown. Conditions in the local communities that got established—which were usually very small—were often regulated through charters set up by the citizenry. These contracts among the settlers laid down the principle of the rule of law, and they set out the civil and political rights to be enjoyed by the inhabitants—all in accordance with long-standing British conventions.

These new societies can be seen as a continuation of the “medieval” tradition—based on constitutional charters, citizens’ rights, and representation—that had eventually been suppressed in many parts of Europe, but which had been maintained to an essential degree in the settlers’ original homeland. Planted in American soil, however, these institutional arrangements were to have special and far-reaching consequences. Compared with conditions in Britain, the settler communities were governed in a much more democratic way. The qualifications for voting that applied in Britain had different effects in the new country. To have the right to vote, one had to own a certain minimum amount of property. Back in Britain, this meant that about 5 percent of the adult male population could take part in elections for various public offices. But in the new country, where there was an abundance of land to cultivate—the settlers were farmers as a rule—many citizens were property owners of considerable scale. Hence, the majority of the men were normally entitled to vote in elections (Bailyn 1968).

It should be observed, however, that conditions were not uniform in colonial America. In the northern provinces (in New England), public decision making was characterized by a high degree of localism and popular involvement. In the middle provinces (around New York), and particularly in the South, government structures were more centralized. Compared with the situation in Britain and elsewhere in Europe, however, political life throughout the colonies was marked by high degree of local independence, owing to the limited capacity and passive nature of the colonial administration. Most public activities were organized at the local, municipal level (Janiskee 2010; Howard 1968; Palmer 1959).

One particular feature in America was the special role played by judicial institutions. Besides their normal function of resolving different disputes in society, the courts also had extensive administrative functions, such as the recording of debts and the issuing of licenses and contracts. Moreover, they often supervised public undertakings, their role being to make sure that the work was carried out in accordance with current rules and done in a proper way. Due to their achievements and their democratic foundation—the British jury system was applied, and local judges were often elected—the courts generally enjoyed great respect and independence.

The larger units, the provinces, had come into being originally through royal decision. The British king had granted authority to certain individuals or companies to develop a specific territory. Provincial authorities were responsible for the building and maintaining of various kinds of infrastructure and for organizing military forces (the displaced Indian population constituted a constant threat). The distribution of land and regulation of trade were



other duties of prime importance. To start with, the original proprietors ran colonial affairs. But soon, when settlement had gained momentum, the new citizens called for influence at the provincial level, too. Such demands were regularly satisfied, and new colonial charters of a constitutional character were inaugurated. These charters were usually drafted by a representative organ elected by the citizens. Then, to gain legal status, the documents in question had to be confirmed by the royal cabinet in London. But this was mainly a formal requirement. A high degree of independence prevailed even at the upper, provincial level—based on popular consent. The remoteness afforded by the vast ocean made control from London difficult. Besides, in the seventeenth century when these initial constitutional structures were being set in America, the main British authorities (king and parliament) were engaged in a protracted power struggle. Hence, the colonies were largely left alone.

As noted, the political order that got established was not uniform. The constitutional charters varied from one province to another, as did the actual political conditions. Nevertheless, some general patterns can be distinguished. In general, the institutional setup at the colonial level was marked by a separation of powers. The governors, who were appointed by the British crown, held executive responsibility. They served as military commanders-in-chief and made a number of vital appointments in both administrative and judicial fields. Each governor was assisted by a small council, composed of people (normally from the upper strata) whom he had appointed. Yet the governor's power was circumscribed in one important way. He lacked the authority to raise revenues. Such decisions could only be made by the popularly elected representative assembly, giving this organ far-reaching influence. Governors had the right to veto decisions made by the assembly, but this was a relatively weak weapon. In the conflicts that occurred, the assembly could often get its way by restricting or cutting off the flow of funds. Normally, moreover, the governor could not use his military position in order to make threats. He was certainly the supreme commander; however, since the resources needed for supplying the armed forces were controlled by the assembly, this capacity was mainly on paper. In reality, therefore, governors could be treated fairly arrogantly, as assemblies meddled in purely executive affairs like military matters and the appointment of officials—all through “the power of the purse” (Kromkowski 2002: ch. 2; Wood 1991: ch. 7; Lutz 1988).

For a long time—more than 150 years—colonial America was governed in the habitual way. In reality, the citizens ruled themselves, with mostly nominal supervision by the British authorities. In the 1760s, however, the British government sought to change this state of affairs. In the interest of improving its financial situation, which had been strained after wars against France (staged in part on American soil), the British government decided, with full parliamentary support, to levy taxes in America. This had never been done before. It might be noted that the Americans constituted a very attractive source of revenue. Colonial America was a rich agricultural land, and commerce and craftsmanship flourished in big cities like New York, Boston, and Philadelphia. The standard of living had risen above that in England.