

Graham K. Wilson

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Chatham House Publishers, Inc.
Chatham, New Jersey

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CHATHAM HOUSE PUBLISHERS, INC.

Post Office Box One

Chatham, New Jersey 07928

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PUBLISHER: Patricia Artinian

COVER DESIGN: Antler Designworks

MANAGING EDITOR: Katharine Miller

PRODUCTION SUPERVISOR: Melissa Martin

COMPOSITION: Bang, Motley, Olufsen

PRINTING AND BINDING: Versa Press, Inc.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Wilson, Graham K.

Only in America? : the politics of the United States in comparative perspective / Graham K. Wilson.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 1-56643-058-5 (pbk.)

1. United States—Politics and government. 2. National characteristics, American. 3. Comparative government. I. Title.

JK271.W58 1998

306.2'0973—dc21

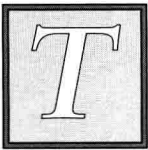
98-8861

CIP

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Preface



THE UNITED STATES arouses strong feelings. It is a country whose citizens are among the most patriotic in the world, convinced that their nation's political institutions and society are the most admirable. Yet the United States has also been the object of a torrent of criticism from other countries. The left in Europe long disdained it as the most capitalist of advanced industrial democracies, the nation in which business was least constrained by the state or unions; the American state was too weak to limit the power of business (even if it had wished to do so), and unions lacked the membership. European conservatives (until the 1970s) too were concerned with goals and values not well served by the market to approve of American society, and in consequence they tended to view the United States with disdain almost equal to the left's. Conservatives feared the consequences of mass culture (epitomized for them by Hollywood) unconstrained by elitism of the sort that brought Britain state-subsidized theater and the BBC and classical music. For the left, the masses in the United States were powerless in the face of the dominance of capitalism; for the conservatives, the masses were too powerful, producing a coarse, anti-intellectual, and culturally impoverished society. Both left and right agreed that the United States provided a dreadful warning, not a model, for the rest of the world.

Perhaps the late twentieth century has revealed a somewhat more nuanced picture. Europeans may know that in addition to McDonald's (which, after all, has been astonishingly successful in Europe), the United States produces outstanding symphony orchestras such as the Chicago Symphony and many internationally prominent opera singers. The European left has belatedly adopted many of the concerns of the American left: feminism, multiculturalism, environmentalism, and opposition to racism. Yet the belief persists that the United States is a very different and strange place. Even journalists working for "quality" British newspapers (as opposed to the "tabloids," which make no pretense of covering news intelligently) have difficulty in reaching beyond stereotypes of American politics and society. The British conservative weekly *The Spectator* recently stated sternly that the weird offerings of the United States to the rest of the world were moving beyond the tolerable (football) and were becoming increasingly unacceptable.¹ Other Europeans have even greater difficulty coming to terms with the United States. It has become fashionable to treat Britain and the United States as part of an allegedly "Anglo-Saxon" category² in comparative politics, a group of countries with low levels of protection for their citizens from the hardships of life.

The strong feelings that the United States arouses are the backdrop to this book, which approaches a topic that, for me, is both personally important and intellectually unavoidable. That topic is whether American politics is fundamentally similar to or different from politics in other advanced industrialized democracies. Among persons interested in the topic, this is known as the question of "American exceptionalism." This question, it cannot be stressed too strongly, is *not* whether the United States is "better" or "worse" than other nations but whether it is different.

This question has recurred throughout my teaching career. I started as a political scientist at the University of Essex in England teaching American politics. In mid career, I moved to the University of Wisconsin, where I taught mainly American politics, an area seen by most of its academic expositors as separate from and indeed possibly in competition or even conflict with comparative politics (although this was much less an issue at Wisconsin, in a department renowned for its collegiality and intellectual tolerance, than at many other universities). It was hard for me to see that someone who taught courses

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on American politics in England was a comparativist, while someone who taught the same courses in the United States was a different academic animal. More important, it seemed clear that the basic questions asked by comparative political scientists—what is distinctive about politics in any country, and why—were also appropriate to ask about American politics, even though they are rarely addressed explicitly or even implicitly by most experts on American politics.

As an Englishman living in the United States, married to an American, and making frequent visits to Britain, it was almost inevitable that I should be involved in numerous discussions at dinner parties about the nature of Americans and the United States compared with Europeans and European nations. Anyone who has been involved in such discussions will know how quickly they degenerate into stereotypes. Europeans quickly tell Americans that they live in a violent, selfish society that refuses to extend to its citizens the most basic forms of social protection (such as national health insurance), which are taken for granted by citizens of European nations. Discussion often becomes heated as Europeans explain these alleged features of American public policy in terms of the values of individual Americans. Motivated by a quest for individual advancement and success, Americans are said to be less willing than others to pay taxes to support the less fortunate. Americans sometimes give as good as they get, implying that they live in the only true democracy and the only society in which social mobility occurs. Only in America, they suggest, all evidence to the contrary notwithstanding, can someone from humble origins rise to the top.

Although European critics and patriotic American defenders of the United States disagree on much, they are united by the belief that the United States is indeed different. Visitors to the United States today, no less than in the nineteenth century, return to Europe with anecdotes, retold with a mixture of delight, astonishment, and horror, of what America is like. European social scientists have often felt obliged to treat the United States as the grand exception to theories in areas such as class conflict, voting behavior, and the development of the state. Contemporary theorists of American exceptionalism always sense the shadow of illustrious intellectual predecessors, particularly Alexis de Tocqueville,³ Werner Sombart,⁴ and perhaps most influential in this century, Louis Hartz.⁵ In a variety of ways that we encounter later, these intellectual giants attempted to describe and explain a

United States that was dramatically different from other advanced industrial democracies. Yet a critical reading of their works inevitably prompts two questions.

The first question is whether the United States is indeed characterized by long historical continuities in its politics that make it unique. Those who believe in America's exceptionalism—the belief that the United States is fundamentally different in its politics from all other nations—assert that these fundamental differences can be traced back to the founding of the nation, if not earlier. Differences in social structure and ideology regarded as long established even by early-nineteenth-century visitors such as Tocqueville continue to shape American politics in a unique mold today. Yet we might doubt whether historical influences are so determining. The enormous changes in nearly all aspects of American life, including politics, over the past two hundred years make such stress on continuity questionable. Would the size and scope of government today or the nature of our political debates really seem familiar to Lincoln or his contemporaries?

The second question is whether American politics really is all that different from politics in other countries. Again, personal experience made me (belatedly) wonder whether the conventional account was true. After I had lectured for six years on American politics stressing the American traditions of hostility to high taxation, faith in market mechanisms, and antipathy to an extensive domestic role for the state (including doubts about a large-scale welfare state), I saw Britain enter into a period of Conservative, Thatcherite government that ended only when the left-of-center Labour Party adopted many of Thatcher's policies and repackaged itself as "New Labour." The key features of Thatcherite policy were, of course, hostility to high taxation, faith in market mechanisms, and antipathy to an extensive domestic role of the state (including doubts about a large-scale welfare state). The close parallels between the strategies of Tony Blair, the leader of the Labour Party, and President Clinton and his "New Democrats" are obvious. Books that I had treasured, such as Hartz's *The Liberal Tradition in America* and Samuel Beer's *British Politics in the Collectivist Age*⁶ (or, as I knew it under its title in Britain, *Modern British Politics*) had long assured me of the fundamental differences between American and British conservatism. Yet the warm personal relations and policy cooperation between Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan seemed to

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contradict any notion that these conservative leaders represented fundamentally different traditions. All the signs are that the relationship between Tony Blair and Bill Clinton is similarly close.

More important, I began to feel frustrated as a social scientist by the absence of evidence in discussions of America's exceptionalism. If you are asked to justify a claim that the politics of any country is fundamentally different from or similar to the politics of other countries, there are a number of obvious areas to explore. These include the nature of beliefs about politics and government, the issues that are the subject of political debate, patterns of public policy, and the character of political institutions. In other words, you would probably want to know whether people in a particular country held unusual beliefs about what government should do and how it should work, what issues were argued about in politics, what policies the government followed, and whether political institutions produced distinctive political practices or patterns of behavior.

On some aspects of the question of whether American politics is exceptional, evidence is fairly readily available; on others little research has been attempted. For example, eminent scholars have provided analyses of differences between the political beliefs of Americans and citizens of other democracies. Seymour Martin Lipset, for example, in numerous important and intriguing publications has argued that American political beliefs are very different from British or Canadian beliefs.⁷ Contrarily, few if any efforts have been made to describe systematically what politics has been about in the United States, to summarize the content of the political agenda and compare it with the content of the political agendas of other democracies.

I believe that any verdict on how exceptional American politics really is should be based on analyses of all the areas mentioned earlier: beliefs, agendas, policies, and institutions. My book rests therefore on a mixture of discussion of original work by others and my own original work. I am very grateful to the scholars in this field whose works I cite, without which I could not attempt to provide an encompassing analysis of exceptionalism. I also wish to express my gratitude to the Glenn and Cleone Orr Hawkins benefaction to the Department of Political Science, University of Wisconsin, which has supported my research, and to my colleagues for making those resources available to me. Above all, I want to thank those who sparked my interest in American politics, especially the late Philip Williams, and those who

have tolerated and assisted me in living a life anchored on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. Prominent among these are my father Leslie Wilson, my wife Virginia Sapiro, and my son Adam Wilson, all of whom in different ways have accepted and assisted me in a peculiar lifestyle that reflects a reluctance to miss out on the glories of either European or American life.

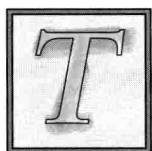
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I

Difference



THIS BOOK is about whether politics in the United States is different from politics in other advanced industrialized democracies. Politics is always different to some degree from one country to another. Nevertheless, the belief has often been expressed that politics in the United States is so fundamentally different that the United States is “exceptional.”

Exceptional—and the term naming the condition of being different from the norm, *exceptionality* or *exceptionalism*—are problematic words, however.¹ At the very least, they invite two additional questions. The first is, “How? In what respect is something exceptional?” If we say that something is exceptional, we have in mind general criteria for use in assessment, some explicit or implicit list of relevant characteristics. To say that a chocolate cake is exceptionally good indicates that we have expectations about the criteria for assessing chocolate cakes.

The second question is, “Compared with what?” With what or with whom are we making comparisons? If we say that a country’s politics is exceptional, we are drawing a contrast between its politics and the politics of other countries, or at least other countries that we regard as being sufficiently similar in important respects, such as their level of economic development or their being commonly regarded as democracies, to make comparison meaningful. Thus if we are talking about Adam being exceptionally tall, it is important to know that we are comparing him with other twelve-year-olds, not players in the National Basketball Association.

What criteria are being used when we say that America’s politics

is exceptional, and with which countries' politics are we comparing America's politics? Unfortunately, there have not been uniform answers to these questions.

The first perspective on exceptionalism, the perspective that arouses the strongest passions, is the claim that the United States is exceptional in the degree to which it embodies such internationally espoused (if not universal) values as democracy, freedom, liberty, and, if only before the law, equality. This type of exceptionalism often appears in patriotic rhetoric. The United States is "the last best hope of mankind," a "city on a hill" that provides the rest of humanity with an example that they might aspire to emulate. The United States opened its arms to the downtrodden of the world, gave them equal treatment under the law, full citizenship rights, and the opportunity to succeed in life.²

The patriotic form of exceptionalism clearly contains an element of reality. Many immigrants to the United States from eastern Europe in the nineteenth century, as well as from countries such as Mexico today, have gained far greater political and citizenship rights by becoming American citizens than they would have enjoyed in their homelands. When Lincoln said at Gettysburg that the Union's dead in the Civil War had died so that "government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth," his implicit contrast was correct, although by the standards of the late twentieth century, vastly overstated. In spite of slavery and the denial—as in all other countries at that date—of citizenship rights to women, the United States was clearly more democratic than any other polity (including Britain).³

The success of struggles for democracy in other countries and the tremendous increase in the prosperity of Europe in the thirty years after World War II—trends that the United States generally tried its best to encourage—have made the contrasts between the degree of democracy in the United States and in other industrialized nations less dramatic than in Lincoln's day. Indeed, citizens of other democracies often believe that their systems are more, not less, democratic than the U.S. political system. Admirers of the British or Westminster model of democracy have argued that the type of parliamentary system it embodies is more democratic than the American system largely because of the clearer lines of accountability and responsibility of the governors to the governed that it embodies, aided by a considerably lesser

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role for money in politics. While patriotic Americans may point in reply to features of American politics such as stronger formal protection for civil liberties and legislation providing for greater public access to government information than Britons enjoy, the point is not who is right but that the question of which nation is more democratic is much harder to resolve today than in Lincoln's time.

This lessening of the contrasts between the United States and Europe is not limited to the political sphere but extends to aspects of social life such as prosperity and equality that have been interpreted as desirable consequences of American democracy. Europeans have become accustomed to levels of prosperity and mobility that would once have been associated only with the United States. Descendants of Italian immigrants to the United States may contrast their life in America with the lives of forebears in villages in Sicily; the contrast with Italians who moved to the north of Italy, one of the world's richest regions, is much less clear. Early-nineteenth-century observers thought that the United States exhibited unusually high levels of social equality, but at the end of the twentieth century the United States has one of the world's most unequal distributions of income and wealth.

Arguments about whether western European nations are more or less democratic than the United States occasionally provide some interesting insight into differences in how concepts such as democracy are understood. L.J. Sharpe, for example, argued that an important difference between British and U.S. understandings of democracy was that Americans tended to emphasize opportunities for participation, whereas the British tended to stress opportunities for the majority to be able to achieve its goals.⁴ More commonly, such arguments produce more heat than insight. Non-Americans are deeply offended by Americans' claims of democratic superiority and respond by over-emphasizing discredited aspects of American politics such as its dependence on vast amounts of money, low turnout in elections, and corruption. Although the work of some social scientists might seem to provide evidence relevant to these arguments, such as claims that Americans are more participatory than people in other democracies,⁵ most who write on exceptionalism seek to escape the heavy emotional entanglements of debates over claims of national superiority. Seymour Martin Lipset, for example, one of the most important contemporary writers on the subject, carefully explains that when he writes of exceptionalism, he is not arguing for the superiority of the United States,

merely its difference. What form does that difference take, however? In practice, different aspects of exceptionalism have been emphasized.

Culture

One of the most important forms of the argument for America's exceptionalism contends that Americans' values are exceptional. Americans have political goals different from those of citizens of other democracies, differing in what they expect from government, how they expect to be treated by government, and how they think government should behave. The commonly accepted view is that Americans hold beliefs that are summarized as falling within the "liberal tradition." Here the word *liberal* is used in its nineteenth-century, rather than contemporary, sense to mean belief in a limited role for government, protection of civil liberties, and democracy. If this view is correct, Americans expect less of government in services, particularly in the provision of social welfare, than do citizens of other democracies; they strongly support civil liberties such as freedom of the press; and they are of course strongly in favor of a democratic form of government.

The most influential expression of the belief that American politics takes place within a "liberal tradition" was provided by Louis Hartz. His book *The Liberal Tradition in America*,⁶ by both describing and seeking to explain the dominance of a liberal tradition, did more than any other work to shape the debate over America's exceptionalism in modern times. Hartz argued that the liberal tradition was so strong in the United States that it was "hegemonic." Alternative schools of political thought that advocated a greater and more positive role for government could not thrive in the United States as they did in the countries of western Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and, to a more limited degree, Canada, because of the dominance of liberal thought. Chief among the political traditions that have been strong elsewhere but almost absent from American politics has been social democracy. The United States is unique among industrialized democracies in never having had a social democratic movement with a strong popular following. The question asked by the German sociologist Werner Sombart early this century, "why is there no socialism in the United States?"⁷ has continued to preoccupy distinguished scholars such as Lipset.⁸ It is important to stress, however, that Hartz noted the absence

from American politics not only of socialism on the left but also of paternalistic conservatism on the right, which, like democratic socialism, accepted a positive role for the state. Whereas British Conservatives and continental European Christian Democratic parties speedily accepted the creation of a welfare state that included government-funded health care, **American conservatives have never accepted the legitimacy of the welfare state**; congressional Republicans in the 1990s vehemently opposed the creation of national health insurance and vigorously pushed measures to restrict access to welfare for the poor.⁹

Hartz's book explored attitudes about the role of government in the thinking of politicians and intellectuals. We also have available a vast quantity of evidence gathered through opinion polls about the views of ordinary Americans. In a later chapter we use this evidence to ask whether in fact Americans do adhere to the liberal tradition that Hartz described. Are expectations about the appropriate role of government really as circumscribed as Hartz suggested? And are Americans unusually supportive of civil liberties such as freedom of expression for unpopular minorities, as the liberal tradition would require?

Agendas and the Content of American Politics

Between citizens and policies stand numerous institutions that have the capacity to transmit or distort their views. Institutions, as political scientists have long argued, admit interests (and opinions) to the political agenda or keep them off.¹⁰ **One argument made to explain the failure of social democracy in the United States is that the early development of mass political parties in the United States blocked the growth of a party with mass support among the working class; American (white male) workers were already committed to the Republican or Democratic parties before socialism had a chance to take root.**¹¹ Some interests are likely to find it easier to place their concerns on the political agenda because of the way political institutions are organized. The fact that Congress continues to have agriculture committees in an era in which only about 2.5 percent of the population are farmers makes it easier for farmers to place their concerns on the political agenda.

Those who believe that the United States is exceptional would expect to find that its political agenda is distinctive. In particular, we

would expect to find that the political agenda is dominated by issues that fit easily within a liberal tradition, whereas issues incompatible with such a tradition would be absent. Issues related to the welfare state would be relatively few, whereas issues related to civil liberties or civil rights would be more numerous. The relative weakness of support for social democratic concerns (such as building the welfare state) may also have left the United States more open to what have been termed “new politics” concerns, such as environmental protection. Ronald Inglehart argues that as levels of prosperity have increased, political attention has shifted from “bread and butter” issues such as the economy to concerns such as environmental protection.¹² The fact that the United States has one of the highest standards of living in the world should make it particularly likely to have a political agenda containing numerous “new politics” issues.

Although there is much theorizing about the political agenda and its biases, as we see later, there may be as much difficulty in defining it as in describing it. Is an item on the political agenda if it is discussed in Congress or one of its committees, or if it is mentioned by the president? In chapter 3 we explore further what it might mean to say that an issue is “on the political agenda” and examine whether the American agenda has been distinctive compared with the political agendas of other nations.

Policies

If, as Hartz argued, Americans believe in a more restricted role for government than do their counterparts in other democracies, and if the United States is a democracy, we would expect to find that government in the United States plays a smaller role in the lives of its citizens than do governments in other democracies. The United States would be exceptional, therefore, in terms of what its government does and fails to do, as well as in terms of the opinions of its citizens.

At first sight, as we detail in a later chapter, these expectations are fulfilled. Governments in the United States (national, state, and local) spend and control a smaller proportion of the gross domestic product (GDP) than governments in any other advanced democracy except Japan. The proportion of GDP spent and distributed by government in the United States is between a third and a quarter of the average pro-