James Q. Wilson and American Exceptionalism

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Jim Wilson believed in American exceptionalism. So do I and lots of other people, especially people outside the academy. Although James Ceaser argues that use of the term was limited almost entirely to scholarly discourse until a few years ago, “it has now gone viral [and] serves for the most part as a term of polarization that divides liberals from conservatives.” Liberals tend to disparage it in favor of the notion that America is merely ordinary while conservatives insist that America is indeed extraordinary – and extraordinarily good. But as I say, these are only tendencies. For example, Stalin is said by Charles Murray to have been the first to use the phrase as such, denouncing the heresy that a Communist revolution could not happen here.

But as Wilson would be the first to note, the exceptionalism debate raises an important set of questions. What does it mean to claim that a nation is exceptional? Is America exceptional in this sense? If so, in what respects? Even if it was exceptional in the past, does it remain so today? And if it is still exceptional, so what -- what difference does or should it make? This essay sheds light on these questions in order to promote the more intelligent debate that Ceaser finds wanting.

As a matter of common observation, every nation is different, just as every culture and individual is. All observant travelers note distinctive features in the nations, cultures, and individuals that they encounter. These differences press themselves upon us; we find them strange and thus stimulating, often charming, sometimes repellent. As we learn about these differences, we often conclude that they are deeply-rooted. But when commentators describe a national, culture, or individual as exceptional, they usually mean something else -- not just that it is exotic or
different from the others, but that it is very different, perhaps even unique. To put it another way: all (nations, cultures, individuals) are distinctive and even exceptional, but some are more exceptional than others.

In this essay, I shall make a similar claim about America: it is more exceptional than other Western democracies in the sense that it is more of an outlier along more dimensions of national life, farther from the mean of many distributions of national variables. It should not be necessary (but alas, it is necessary) to add that this does not necessarily mean that it is better. To rigorously test such a normative claim, we would have to agree about four things upon which concurrence is notoriously elusive: a theory of value; a specification of the variables to be compared in light of that theory; a metric for each of those variables; and a way to trade them off and net them out in order to produce an overall ranking. I certainly am not up to the task.

Some object to even descriptive claims of American exceptionalism. One can easily understand why. Such a claim seems to carry more than a whiff of the normative superiority I have just disclaimed but that many critics, both domestic and foreign,⁴ are keen to debunk. The U.S., they point out, is now in decline in areas that we once dominated, such as public education, public health, democratic participation, and even some sports. Other nations have indeed caught up with or exceeded our achievements, and still others will do so in the future. Some disparage our global pre-eminence, past or current, by rooting it in violence and treachery rather than in anything unique and admirable in our character, culture, or achievements. Our vaunted standard of living, they maintain, is not rising as fast as it once did, and in any event was built on the backs of the poor; our attainments pale before our gross social inequalities. Slavery, Indian removal, racism, and nativism, among other excrescences, blight our history.
Such arguments depend on factual, conceptual, and methodological claims that I shall not pursue the matter here. In *Understanding America: The Anatomy of an Exceptional Nation* (2008), a book that Wilson and I co-edited, we described how many exceptionalism deniers view the U.S.:

Americans may proudly think of their national as exceptional, but many foreigners roll their eyes and complain that Americans often deviate from the democratic ideal. To them, American are exceptional all right: exceptionally vulgar, exceptionally materialistic, exceptionally imperialistic, exceptionally clumsy, exceptionally unfeeling, and exceptionally self-centered.5

We thought these animadversions were “unduly harsh”:

Americans may be vulgar, but our music, books, and films dominate the global cultural market—and not just at the low end. American may be materialistic, but our material goods—blue jeans, iPods, and computer programs—are eagerly consumed everywhere. America may seem imperialistic, but most of the people in Europe, Bosnia, Kosovo, Kuwait, Taiwan, Israel, and Iraq wanted to be assured that in their hour of need, American military might was available to help them. Americans may be clumsy, but a superpower seeking to pacify a convulsive, often hostile world is found to stumble a times. American may prefer a welfare state more limited than Europe’s, but they are extraordinarily philanthropic toward the poor. Americans may be self-absorbed, but who isn’t?6

Instead of attempting to assess American exceptionalism at the high level of generality at which such discourse is usually conducted, we took an obvious, albeit surprisingly rare, approach to the question. We asked some of the very best social scientists in America to write about as many important aspects of our national life as would fit in a single volume. (We also recruited a
prominent European commentator (journalist-scholar Josef Joffe) to reflect on how the U.S. is viewed there). Using the best, most current empirical evidence, each author analyzed in detail a single area of public policy, institutional structure, or cultural domain. Where possible, they discussed how the U.S. compares with other wealthy democracies with respect to their topic. This would rest exceptionalism assessments on a bedrock foundation of facts. Even then, of course, we might well be left with tough judgment calls about just how distinctive or unique the U.S. is in this or that respect, and especially across-the-board. But this approach to the subject, we felt, was the best that anyone could do to ground such judgments in high-quality data. (In a few cases, I have updated the information).

In this paper, I shall focus on the comparative findings in each of the book’s twenty chapters. (Because of limited space, the chapters did not reach some important aspects of American life, notably sports, science and technology, and foreign policy.* I shall briefly conclude, as the book does, by looking across the book’s findings in a search for more general conclusions about how we should best think about American exceptionalism.

The Political System

This topic, authored by the Nelson Polsby shortly before his death, is probably the aspect of American exceptionalism that is best understood, and accordingly I shall only touch on its main elements lightly. Two aspects of the U.S. political system – federalism and the judiciary – were analyzed by other authors and are treated separately below.

* In one case, Orlando Patterson’s penetrating chapter on black Americans, I concluded that the comparative approach used here was unworkable due to this group’s unique status in American life.
Constitution. The U.S. Constitution is not only the oldest constitution among OECD countries; it is also the most terse and has been amended very infrequently (the first ten in the Bill of Rights (1791) almost immediately after ratification, and then eighteen more times). Although it was a model for many democratic constitutions during the 18th and 19th centuries, it has become something of an outlier, aped by relatively few countries.  

Separation of Powers. As Polsby noted, “What the Framers created was... emphatically not a presidential system, where the chief executive rules more or less alone; nor was it a parliamentary system where the ‘government’ arises via party organization from a relatively passive legislature. Rather, they created a system in which president and Congress, as separate entities, must cooperate in the making of laws and in practice actively compete in exercising influence over the subordinate agencies of the permanent government.” (5) In this competition, the Congress’s numerous controls, both formal and informal, over an administration’s policy and implementation makes it unquestionably the most powerful legislature in the world, at least with respect to domestic policy. Its powers over foreign policy, although less formidable, are still extensive. The executive’s ability to check and balance Congress – mainly through the veto power, appointment to senior positions over the bureaucracy, discretion in how to interpret and implement laws, its special advantages in conducting foreign relations, and its ability as the sole nationally-elected official to exert greater influence over public opinion – is not inconsiderable, but in other democracies’ political systems where the chief executive utterly dominates the parliament, such checking powers are largely unnecessary. Because the Congress is so powerful compared not only with foreign legislatures but also with the U.S.’s other political institutions, its internal structure matters far more than in other systems. Polsby, perhaps the leading scholar on the Congress, notes that in other systems, the more
numerous, more representative body is usually the most important by far, whereas the opposite is true in the U.S., where the smaller, more severely malapportioned Senate is *primus inter pares*. In addition, the congressional staff has grown enormously relative to the size of the much larger executive branch. These are just a few of the innumerable ways in which our system of separated powers is unique.

Complexity. Polsby also emphasizes the remarkable complexity of the American political system. One dimension of this complexity is the intricate, opaque interaction of separated powers, federalism, and judicial power. (The latter two are discussed below). A second is the number, length, and cost of elections. As Jack Citrin notes: “Americans have more opportunities to vote than citizens of any other democracy. Staggered elections at set times; primary elections for nominating candidates; elections for judges, local administrators, and boards; and direct democracy at the state and local levels make for frequent trips to the polls to fill out truly long ballots.” (175) Partly for this reason, Citrin argues, Americans vote at much lower rates than the citizens of virtually every other democracy. (Other reasons for lower U.S. turnout include the use of plurality voting rules, with its many “wasted” votes, rather than proportional representation, and differences in how turnout is calculated). (175-77)

A third contributor to political complexity is “the sheer size of the decision-making community in American government” which Polsby illustrates with an “ambassador’s problem”:

An ambassador newly-arrived in most of the world’s capital cities can, over a reasonable length of time, get to know virtually everybody who is instrumental to governmental decision making. Even in the most advanced and civilized democratic nations, there is a not-too-large group of parliamentarians and civil servants who, to all intents and purposes, run the country. . . .In the United States, that number is
dauntingly large. . .in part because policymaking is not contained within the
government, or even within the interplay between the two political branches of
government, but spills out into a great variety of intermediary organizations. (23-24)

Federalism. The U.S. is not alone, of course, in having a federal system that devolves†
power to sub-national units. Martha Derthick contrasts America’s version both with Europe’s
unitary states and with its federal states which, except for Switzerland, “tend to treat federalism
as a form of decentralized unitary government rather than as a product of formerly separate
sovereigns.” It is comparable to Australia’s version but Canada is more decentralized. (122)

American federalism does have several exceptional features. One is how it affects the party
system. Polsby observes that “A significant reasons that Americans make do with only two
major political parties, unlike voters in other much smaller western European countries who are
accustomed to have what they perceive to be a far greater range of partisan choices, is because
each of the two American major parties is in most respects a loose coalition of state parties.
These coalitions are not structured alike [and they produce] “close to a one-hundred-party
system.” (20)

A second distinctive feature of American federalism is the relative size of the national and sub-
national governments. State and local governments, Derthick notes, employ vastly more people
than the federal government does: 18.6 million versus 2.7 million civilians in 2003, counting

† “Devolves” is a misleading verb in that it implies that power was first consolidated at the center
and then delegated to the periphery. Although this is true in some cases, other countries have
organized themselves in the opposite direction, with regional entities combining to create a
both part-time and full-time employees. California’s government – in terms of employees, tax revenues, and other indices of size -- is larger than that of most nations. (139)

A third unique feature of our federalism, emphasized by Wilson, is the decentralization of law enforcement: “In Europe, the criminal justice system tends to be centralized, with national policy forces and government ministries that oversee law enforcement. Though Great Britain has fifty-two police departments, America has at least seventeen thousand and maybe more. In America, every city, county, and state has its own police department; every county and many cities have their own elected district or city attorney; and every state has its own correctional system. . . .The main consequence of America’s decentralized system is that public opinion closely watches and deeply influences law enforcement.” (475-76)

Political culture. Jack Citrin, like Tocqueville, Hartz, and so many other observers of American politics, emphasizes America’s uniquely liberal tradition. This is manifest in “the absence of a strong socialist party, the weakness of the labor movement, the acceptance of economic inequality, and the limited development of government programs in the area of welfare and health care.” (147-48) It is also reflected in the robust civil society that dominates more areas of social life than in any other country, performing numerous functions, including philanthropy, that elsewhere are performed by government. (Brooks, chapter 18)

Americans are far more individualistic than Europeans. Even blacks and Hispanics, whose status in the individualist social order tends to be lower, are more like white Americans that Europeans in their optimism, emphasis on personal responsibility, skepticism about government income guarantees, support for private ownership of business, and belief that poverty is due more to lack
of individual motivation than to unfair treatment by society. “Consistent with these attitudes,” Citrin finds:

Americans pay lower taxes than most Europeans. America also spends less on transfer payments such as pensions, unemployment insurance benefits, family allowances, and child care than other countries and is virtually the only wealthy democracy without a government-supported universal health care system. Moreover, the financing of Social Security and health care programs reflects the commitment to personal responsibility: individuals and their employers contribute to insurance funds. And unlike many European countries, America restricts the access of even legal immigrants to social services such as Medicare, with widespread public support. This, too, fits the idea that people should contribute before they receive public benefits. (160)

America is also unique among modern nations for its belief in traditional values, even as belief in self-expression and self-realization has grown. Americans’ religiosity and the consequent failure of secular rationality to become dominant are also exceptional among liberal democracies. (172; Wuthnow, chap. 10)

**Bureaucracy.** In the U.S., government bureaucracy, particularly at the federal level, is much smaller relative to GDP than in other liberal democracies. Moreover, its system of administrative law delegates enormous power and discretion to federal agencies under political conditions that make it unusually difficult, especially when compared to European bureaucracies, for officials to establish the democratic legitimacy of their actions. Two of those conditions have already been mentioned: the separation of powers, which multiplies the sources of influence over the administrative system, and fragmentation of decision making, which leaves to state and local officials many of the most important public functions: education, land use, criminal justice,
transportation, domestic relations, tort law, occupational licensure, and much more. Another exceptional feature of the American governmental system that undermines bureaucratic legitimacy is the widespread popular distrust of official power and resistance to its growth.

Compared with government bureaucracies in other countries, American officialdom is unusually open to a broad and diverse swath of the citizenry, including significant representation by ethnic minorities. This contrasts sharply with the French and British administrations, which largely recruit from a handful of elite schools, especially at the higher levels. Further distinguishing the American bureaucracy, fully 85% of the federal government’s employees work outside the capital region. (39)

Also distinctive is the sheer number of political appointees, who cascade deeper into the bureaucracy than in other democracies. The federal government has 3000 political positions in the executive branch; about half of those are at high levels, with most of those leadership positions – numbers that have grown dramatically over time. (43-4) This “layering” of political appointees over the career bureaucracy has increased rapidly and contrasts sharply with many parliamentary governments where only the very top officials’ positions change hands with a new government. In Denmark, for example, there is only a single political appointee – the minister – above the career service. In the U.K., career civil servants operate just below the ministers. As Kettl observes, this layering produces serious problems of competence and continuity:

One is that some appointees lack detailed knowledge and long-term experience in the agencies they are charged with managing. The second is that, by dipping several layers into the bureaucracy, the risk of conflicts with career administrators multiplies. Finally, many of these political appointees serve for relatively short periods of time – often just eighteen months or a little more. (46)
Another exceptional aspect of American bureaucracy is the large extent to which the courts, which are empowered to check the behavior of the other two branches and which afford easy access to those who want to challenge agency action, play a strong role in shaping administrative decisions -- a phenomenon to which I now turn.

The Legal System

Tiresome as it may be to invoke Tocqueville yet again on American exceptionalism, his cogent observation about the distinctive role of lawyers in the U.S. bears repetition: although not born to it, they are the natural aristocracy in a society that lacks one. His point was not only about lawyers’ social status but also about their love of procedural rights and order which make them a bulwark against majoritarian excess.9

Legal historian Lawrence Friedman identifies a number of features of the legal system in the U.S. that distinguish it from that in other liberal democracies. Americans’ deep-seated suspicion of government, together with a highly fragmented and decentralized legal order, assigns vast authority to federal and state courts to constrain the actions of both agencies and legislature – and in a real sense, to make law – through expansive judicial review, which extends to both public and private law. With the largest legal profession in the world (1.1 million in 2006 and growing faster than the overall population), it is also a system that is remarkably accessible to ordinary citizens and strongly oriented toward creating and protecting individual rights at the expense of governmental and social claims. More than any other country, it broadly protects expression of all kinds – not only political advocacy but speechlike behavior (e.g., picketing and message-bearing clothing), commercial advertising, and defamatory, indecent, abusive, and outrageous
utterances as well. It operates in a famously litigious culture of “adversarial legalism,” as Friedman explains:

Other countries may have as much law as the United States. . .but they have much less lawyering. They are also less-rights-conscious. They give more power and discretion to administrative agencies, and they make it harder to challenge those agencies in court. The vast proliferation of jokes about American lawyers, a genre which simply does not exist elsewhere, ironically suggest the greater salience of lawyers in the United States. Only the United States feels it is in the grips of a litigation crisis. . . .In no other country is it so easy to sue for personal injury. . . ; in no other country can damages run so high. . . . Other countries do not allow tort actions so freely, and never produce huge recoveries. But their social safety nets are much more likely to cover the costs of health care, disability, and wage loss. (81-3)

The Economic System

Benjamin Friedman shows that the American economy is unique among those of advanced democracies in achieving a sustained record of growth, job creation, technological innovation, capital investment, and a widespread distribution of ownership. He attributes these achievements to a number of factors: first, the remarkable flexibility and competitiveness of American enterprises; second, a relatively unregulated, highly mobile labor market that imposes few constraints on firms and that rewards workers who can shift from dying industries to growth sectors; and third, the world’s leading financial market, which in turn depends on sound regulation and supervision of financial institutions. The regulatory environment, compared with its more intrusive foreign counterparts, encourages entrepreneurship, new business formation, and job growth. America’s comparative openness to immigration also contributes to these
economic strengths, albeit with some constraining effect on low-skill rates. Finally, a substantial share of American economic output is provided outside the for-profit market economy, in the non-profit sector. The result of all this is a standard of living that has ranked at or near the world’s highest for decades, far outranking all other countries of major size and geopolitical importance.

Friedman explains the features of America’s economy that enable it to produce so much more per person than France’s, or Germany’s, or Japan’s:

One fairly consistent part of the story...is simply that Americans work more. ...Of those who are of normal working age, more are employed in paying jobs than is true on average in the other G-7 countries, and those who hold jobs put in more time working. ...The productivity of American workers [is] also greater than that of workers in the other advanced economies, although less so than the simple difference in output would imply. One influence that helps make American workers more productive, even compared to this in western Europe, is that they receive more schooling. On average Americans have nearly three more years of education than citizens of the other six G-7 countries. ...American workers also have the advantage of more capital with which to do their jobs [which] well exceeds what workers in any of the other G-7 economies have. ...America has accumulated more than twice as much IT capital per person as in the average of other G-7 economies. (97-103)

Friedman goes on to explain the institutional reasons why America’s economy exhibits these features more than other countries do. The American workplace operates under far fewer restrictions of the kind that make companies in Europe in particular reluctant to hire new workers. Labor unions are a far less influential force in the U.S. than in other countries; only 14% of U.S. workers are covered by collective bargaining agreements compared with more than
half on average in the other G-7 countries, including more than 80% in Italy and more than 90% in France. The income and other economic support that non-working citizens receive from government is both less available and less generous in the U.S. than in most other advanced economies. Income earned from working is typically taxed at lower rates in America than in most other advanced countries. Americans’ intense work effort may also reflect deep cultural preferences. Finally, U.S. financial markets are larger, more diversified, more decentralized, more participatory, and thus operate more efficiently to raise capital than elsewhere, and the regulatory and Federal Reserve regimes reinforce these advantages. (103-16) These advantages, of course, do not obviate the significant challenges that the American economy faces. (116-19)

The Media

Robert Lichter shows that the history, culture, and organization of the American mass media are all quite different than in other advanced democracies. The First Amendment, and the colonial tradition of freedom from government control of speech that produced it, have no counterpart abroad: “In Europe, most newspapers and magazines began as organs of ideologically aligned groups such as political parties and churches, with which they retained connections into recent times. In the United States, most publishers had shed their partisan ties by the mid-nineteenth century. They were much more concerned with profit margins than group attachments. . . . Observers as early as Alexis de Tocqueville noted that Americans were more willing to criticize and expose political malefactors than were Europeans, but less likely to develop fundamental criticisms of their political system. . . . Thus, in America the press became the handmaiden of freedom from state oppression; in Europe it was either the object or the instrument of state control. . . . [T]he mass media in the United States have primarily been privately owned businesses [which] have enjoyed unequalled freedom and government support, and electronic
media have been regulated relatively lightly.” (182-6) Lichter concludes that current conditions in the communications industry are making the American media “simultaneously more decentralized, diverse, competitive, and contentious” compared with Europe. (218)

The Military

According to Eliot Cohen, “what distinguishes the American military first and foremost from any other in the planet is sheer size, or rather, wealth. . . . All together, America’s European NATO allies spend a bit more than half of what the United States does. . . . Wealth also makes for unique military systems. . . . This is something new in military history. In the past, the first-rate powers . . . had roughly similar kinds of [equipment]. . . . Today, however, there is only one country that has stealth bombers or 90,000-ton aircraft carriers. . . . The American military is unique in a different respect as well: it has global reach.” (248-54)

Religion

America is by far the most religious of advanced democracies and also the most religiously diverse and decentralized. Moreover, as sociologist Robert Wuthnow observes, American religion reflects many of the very same features that mark the U.S. as exceptional in the secular realm: market competition, individualism, ethnic and racial diversity, privatism, ideological division, localism, evangelical and moralizing movements, and global reach. Ceaser notes that this religiosity has been an important but not exclusive component of a much broader aspect of American exceptionalism – our sense of mission, the widespread notion that we are a chosen people. He emphasizes that this mission idea has had both religious and political aspects, with the former drawing originally on Puritan thought and the latter drawing on the Founders’
constitutional theory, the idea of manifest destiny, and Progressive Era defenses of imperialism.\textsuperscript{11}

When Wuthnow addresses the religious aspect of exceptionalism, he calls attention to Americans’ spiritual consumerism, noting that they shop around for congregations and treat religion as a species of consumer good in some ways, and that American religion is “big business.”\textsuperscript{12} At the same time, he places greater significance on the individualistic nature of religious authority and the personalized style of spiritual questing – a style that middle-class immigrants quickly adopt. The U.S. is also exceptional in the number and density of non-Western religions that are found here. Finally, American religionists are unusually active in conducting missions and philanthropic activities abroad, and more so than ever before.\textsuperscript{13}

\textbf{Popular Culture}

Cultural historian and critic Martha Bayles points out that American popular culture is extraordinarily diverse and rich, and always has been.\textsuperscript{14} In this respect, the U.S. probably does not differ from other wealthy democracies, which have their own vibrant areas of cultural productions and whose cultural markets are increasingly global. The reception of American culture abroad is certainly mixed, especially in the more orthodox Muslim countries, and some backlash has long been evident. As Bayles wryly observes, “America’s typical export these days is not jazz composer Billy Strayhorn’s ‘Take the A Train.’ It is rapper Eminem’s ’Ass Like That.’”\textsuperscript{15} Esthetic and normative judgments aside, however, the U.S. is surely unique in terms of the sheer number of diverse cultural form in which American artists excel, as well as the reach of its cultural influence abroad in film, jazz, and a number of other cultural sectors.

\textbf{The Family}
In their chapter in *Understanding America*, sociologists Linda Waite and Melissa Howe identify many demographic and family trends that are roughly similar in the U.S. and in other developed countries: changes in family structure; marriage and divorce rates; delayed marriage; fertility intentions; and so forth. But several American patterns are unusual. On the positive side, while fertility rates have declined in all developed countries in recent decades, America is still closest to the replacement rate (France is next) while some others have fallen far below it. (Since Waite and Howe wrote this, the U.S. fertility rate has continued to fall and is now about 1.9, presumably a temporary decline due to the Great Recession). On the decidedly negative side, unintended pregnancies and teenage birth rates have been higher in the U.S., which also has the highest share of children born to an unmarried woman living without a partner (16.2%).

**Immigration**

If there is any one aspect of American life that even exceptionalism skeptics would concede is exceptional – and exceptionally successful – it is immigration. This is particularly true during the past half-century, since enactment of the 1965 immigration reform law. The U.S. is by far the leading destination for immigrants. (The country with the next largest number is Russia with 12.3 million). The foreign-born population of the U.S., both authorized and unauthorized, totaled 40.4 million in 2011, or 13% of the total (still below the 14.6% in the first decades of the 20th century), with over one million more (the vast majority of them authorized) coming each year. About half the arrivals to the U.S. since 1965 have come from Latin America and more than a quarter from Asia – ethnic backgrounds very different than those of the native stock at that time.

A number of other OECD countries have higher percentages of foreign-born, but for almost all of them – Australia since the late 1970s, Sweden since the 1990s -- this is a relatively
recent development. By the same token, ethnic diversity in some of those countries is also
great today, though not to the same extent as in the U.S. Americans generally support legal
immigration not just because so many identify as the descendants of immigrants, but also
because of the immense social gains that Americans think it has produced: economic expansion
and competitiveness, population growth, cultural diversity and enrichment, invigoration of
religious communities, promotion of tolerance, a solidarity that is civic rather than primordial,
and much more. They tend to admire legal immigrants both as a group and as individuals, and
believe that they have been good for the country.

The pace of immigrants’ social integration also sets the U.S. apart. By any definition, it is
proceeding rapidly, although at rates that differ from group to group (and indeed from
subgroup to subgroup). The U.S. economy, both formal and informal, produces a very low
immigrant unemployment rate, unlike European economies where immigrants fare far worse.
The immigrant generation acquires English fluency at roughly the same rate as earlier waves did,
that the one-and-a-half generation (American-born children of immigrants) learn it at school and
strongly prefer it to the parents’ native language, that virtually all of the second generation speak
it proficiently by the end of high school, and the third generation is largely monolingual in
English -- and likes it that way. American law also makes citizenship relatively easy to acquire
(and almost impossible to lose), which facilitates immigrants’ integration and new national
identity.

Another significant index, as well as a key cause, of immigrant assimilation is the high rate of
interethnic marriage, particularly between Asian women and Hispanics and whites, and the rapid
residential integration of those groups into white-majority urban and suburban communities.
Also important to their integration are the allure and ethnic diversity of a powerful mass media
and popular culture, including minority-dominated sports teams) and the receptiveness of America’s religious communities to newcomers who are reinvigorating and often transforming these communities. Most unusual as a comparative matter, no nativist political party or significant anti-immigrant movement exists in the U.S., unlike in virtually all other immigrant-receiving countries. Even the relatively conservative and nationalistic Republican Party supports immigration, although differing from the Democrats on some immigration policy issues. Indeed, the most telling political sign of their acceptance in American life the fact that none of the major immigration reform proposals under congressional consideration in 2013 would restrict legal immigration below current levels.

Finally, America’s unique success in integrating immigrants is also evidenced by the experience of Muslims, who express far more alienation in European societies than they do here. Some of this experiential and attitudinal difference reflects demographic patterns in the two regions. The roughly 2.5 million Muslims in the U.S. are highly diverse in terms of countries and regions of origin, languages, and even race (half of native-born Muslims, 20% of the total, are black). American Muslims are also more prosperous, well educated, politically active, and integrated into the larger society (including citizenship) than their European counterparts; indeed, American Muslims equal or exceed the income and education levels of the general population. Many Muslim families have been in the U.S. for three or more generations, while the Muslim migration to Europe largely began with the guest worker programs in the 1950s and has only recently reached significant levels. The greater religiosity of Americans makes for a more congenial environment for devout Muslims (and other immigrants) than in the far more secular societies of Europe. The lower barriers in the U.S. to family-based immigration, entrepreneurship, and
employment growth also play their part, as does the traditional celebration of ethnic diversity in America.

Education

“In 1960,” Paul Peterson observes, “the American educational system was the envy of the world. Though it had many warts – southern schools were racially segregated, disabled students were excluded from schooling, and facilities varied widely from one part of the country to another – a larger proportion of the next generation was attending school for a more extended period of time than in any other major industrial country. . . . Today, the lower tiers of America’s educational system . . . no longer appear exceptional. While U.S. colleges and universities still attract students from abroad, the elementary and secondary pillars on which the higher educational system stands rank, at best, near the average of all industrialized nations. . . . This, despite the following facts: America’s parents are better educated, earn more, and have more time to devote to their children’s instruction; U.S. schools have far more fiscal resources per pupil – in real dollar terms – than ever before, and the number of professionals per pupil within the school building has grown steadily over the decades to that classes in the twenty-first century have, on average, none fewer students than they did in 1960.”

Despite this comparative mediocrity, several features of the American education system remain exceptional. First, its decentralization to local communities is far greater than in other countries. Local control of the public schools extends not only to their administration but also, and even more important, to their financing primarily through local property taxes. The latter produces great and lamentable inequalities in per pupil spending, inequalities that are only marginally alleviated by federal programs targeting low-income children. A second unique feature is the
comparative excellence of American institutions of higher education, particularly liberal arts colleges and research universities. Finally, and probably related to their comparative excellence, private institutions dominate higher education in the U.S. to a far greater extent than anywhere else.

Medical Care

The system of medical care in the U.S. is more decentralized and privatized than those of other leading industrialized countries, but its most exceptional feature (apart from its leadership in biomedical research and medical training) is its high cost. Americans spend more than $8200 a year on health care, which is more than twice what European and other OECD countries spend and which amounts to 17.6% of GDP. Yet the results are not comparable. The U.S. has fewer physicians per person than in most other OECD countries; in 2010, 2.4 practicing physicians per 1,000 people, well below the OECD average of 3.1. The number of hospital beds in the U.S. was 2.6 per 1,000 people, lower than the OECD average of 3.4 beds. Life expectancy at birth increased by almost nine years between 1960 and 2010, but that was less than the increase of over 15 years in Japan and over 11 years on average in OECD countries. American life expectancy averaged 78.6 years in 2011, well under that in Japan, Canada, and the U.K. Infant mortality is relatively high in the U.S., although reporting practices probably account for some of those differences.

Three other distinctive features are the sources and composition of those expenditures, and the constraints on care. Medical spending is higher in the U.S., but government’s share of that spending is much lower: about 75% in the average OECD country compared with 44% in the U.S. Physicians and drugs are more costly in the U.S., partly due to greater decentralization of
those expenditures and the correspondingly reduced bargaining power with providers and suppliers. Decentralization also accounts for the higher administrative expenses in the U.S. system. Americans receive far more intensive care when they are sick than do people in other countries, especially at the end of life. Finally, access to care in most countries is rationed by limits on supply of hospitals, doctors’ services, and technology; in the U.S., the limitations are more on the demand side through costly insurance with high patient cost-sharing, arrangements that force many low-income patients to seek care in hospital emergency rooms.26

Criminal Justice

What is most exceptional about the American criminal justice system, according to Wilson, is its radical decentralization and the effect of that decentralization on the potency of public opinion about crime.

In Europe, the criminal justice system tends to be centralized, with national police forces and government ministries that oversee law enforcement. Though Great Britain has fifty-two police departments, America has at least seventeen thousand and maybe more. In Britain, there is a national police college that trains almost all of the high-level officials, a lord chancellor who selects and oversees most British judges, and a Home Office that supplies to Parliament proposals designed to guide criminal justice policy for the country as a whole. None of these agencies exists at the national level here. In America, every city, county, and state has its own police department; every county and many cities have their own elected district or city attorney; and every state has its own correctional system. There are national law enforcement agencies such as the FBI and the DEA, but they have a modest number of employees, investigate only a small fraction of all cries, and arrest only a minor part of all suspects.
The main consequence of this more decentralized system, Wilson argues, is that it is far more sensitive to public attitudes and pressures about crime than in Europe, which helps to explain our greater propensity for “get tough on crime” measures, including capital punishment, high incarceration rates, long sentences, and other policies. The U.S. has lower rates of most property crimes than in many other democracies, but a much higher murder rate. Indeed, Wilson observes, “the rate at which Americans kill each other without using guns by relying instead on fists, knives, and blows to the head is three times higher than the non-gun homicide rate in England.” The same difference in fatality rates exists between New York City and London even when the motive is a robbery and no gun is used. “To put it bluntly, Americans are a more violent people than are the British, though the latter have been trying hard to catch up. . . . What is remarkable today is not that we have a higher homicide rate than can be found in other industrial democracies but that it has come down so sharply in the last two decades.”

Jonathan Caulkins and Mark Kleiman note two other differences between the U.S. and European approaches to crime, both related to drugs. Although Americans use roughly equivalent amounts of drugs and probably less alcohol, they consume much more of one drug, cocaine, which is associated with high levels of crime and violence. And our criminal justice system arrests and imprisons more drug offenders than European systems do.

Inequality, Economic Mobility, and Social Policy

Measuring and comparing inequality in different countries is a difficult task, for many reasons explained by Gary Burtless and Ron Haskins, but by most criteria the U.S. is much more unequal than other OECD countries. To cite one measure: Almost 11% of Americans receive a net income below 40% of the U.S. median income – exactly twice the average percentage in other
rich countries; using a higher poverty threshold, moreover, does not change the result very much. Our low-income population receives smaller incomes than the poor in nearly all the other industrial countries, and the rich receive much higher incomes than the rich anywhere else. The U.S. also has a high proportion of youngsters in single-parent families, where they are more likely to be poor than if they lived with two parents.

Much the same is true of inter-generational mobility: the U.S. has only moderate income and occupational mobility compared with other rich countries, although including in the mobility calculations the large income gains by immigrants from poorer countries would reduce this disparity. The U.S.-born, however, do not enjoy exceptional opportunities for upward mobility compared with people born in other rich countries. The wages of American fathers and sons are more similar than wages earned by fathers and sons in other rich countries. Particularly at the bottom of the income distribution, the U.S. is less successful than those in other rich countries in equalizing opportunities for children. By international standards, the U.S. government has established relatively small programs to advance equality. Among the seven largest industrial countries, the U.S. spends the smallest percentage of its national income on direct government provision on social welfare benefits, preferring much more than these other countries do to use a variety of tax preferences to induce the private provision of welfare benefits, especially health care and occupational pensions. Why the U.S. has a smaller social safety net than most other wealthy democracies is a much-studied question. Burtless and Haskins summarize the evidence:

While almost two-thirds of American agree with the statement that ‘income differences

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in the United States are too large,’ policies aimed at reducing income differences command relatively little popular support. On the whole, Americans are not particularly concerned about the income distribution land are less persuaded than citizens in other rich countries of the need for public policies to temper inequality. Only about a quarter of Americans strongly agree that the government should guarantee each citizen a minimum standard of living. In contrast, over half of the population in Japan and in each of five European countries strongly agree that the government has such a responsibility. Americans distinctive views about economic inequality may stem from two related beliefs about the way a just society ought to operate and the way they think their own society functions. A large majority of Americans believe that individuals should bear primary responsibility for supporting themselves, whereas voters in other rich countries are more inclined to believe that governments have an obligation to assure that everyone is provided for. Large majorities of American also believe their society offers an equal opportunity for people to get ahead and think that hard work will ordinarily translate into a better life. Residents of other rich countries are less likely to think their societies provide equal opportunity and are more inclined to believe that differences in individual success are due to luck or personal connections rather than individual effort. . . . [C]omparative international statistics on upward mobility do not support Americans’ relative optimism or Europeans’ pessimism on this score. . . . Socialist and union-dominated parties have never been an important force in American politics. . . . When major reform in social assistance finally came in 1996, it moved the United States much further away from the European social model. . . . [Its] willingness to use strong measures, imposing substantial risk on poor and low-income families, marks a sharp contrast with social policy in much of Europe. Although some European countries have moved toward the U.S. policy of pushing single mothers to work, no European government has been willing to impose the tough measures that are no common in the United States, such as time limits on benefit receipt or cessation of benefit
payments for mothers who refuse to work.\textsuperscript{31}

Burtless and Haskins go on to describe the programs for the \textit{working} poor, which Americans support more generously\textsuperscript{32} – a difference that is less pronounced in Europe.

\textbf{Philanthropy and the Non-Profit Sector}

The flip side of the smaller government support for the poor when compared with Europe’s social programs is America’s private philanthropy. As Arthur Brooks points out, most developed economies have non-governmental sectors, but what sets the U.S. apart is the extent to which this sector provides key public services funded by massive \textit{private} support. In the late 1990s, he notes, Europe’s largest non-profit sector (in the U.K.) was about 14\% as large as the U.S. sector, and this difference has likely grown since then. Even more exceptional, the vast majority of support for the U.S. non-profit sector is purely voluntary: private charitable donations totaled more than $316 billion in 2012, about 2\% of GDP and an increase for the third year in a row.\textsuperscript{33} About three-quarters of this voluntary giving is from living individuals; the rest comes from foundations, corporations, and bequests.\textsuperscript{34}

No developed country approaches American giving and volunteering levels. For example, in 1995, Americans gave, per capita, three and a half times as much to causes and charities as the French, seven times as much as the Germans, and fourteen times as much as the Italians. Similarly, in 1998, Americans were 15 percentage points more likely to volunteer than the Dutch, 21 points more likely than the Swiss, and 32 points more likely than the Germans. These differences are not attributable to demographic characteristics such as education, income, age, sex, or marital status.\textsuperscript{35}
These differences, Brooks shows, reflect several deep differences between the U.S. and comparable societies in Europe. Government’s larger role in European countries “crowds out” private philanthropy and volunteering more than in the less statist U.S.; he cites economists’ estimates that a dollar in public support for social welfare services displaces at least 25 cents in private giving, and defrays private voluntarism as well.”36 Another difference is in the extent of religious belief, which is the single most important predictor of charitable activity. In 2000, religious people were 10 points more likely than secularists to give money to explicitly non-religious charities and 21 points more likely to volunteer.37 Larger family size in the U.S. also translates into more charitable giving.38 A final difference concerns political support for government redistribution, which is much greater in Europe than in America. More conservative citizens tend to be more charitable than liberal ones; people who believe that the government should not equalize incomes gave, on average, four times as much money and other forms of philanthropy to charity as those who believe that the government should do more equalization, after controlling for demographic variables.39

Conclusion

In his fine essay on American exceptionalism, Wilson emphasized many distinctive and in some cases unique features of American life, while cautioning against casual conclusions about how easily we might export them to other societies or isolate them from the larger fabric of our own. The empirical evidence that I have presented here -- which draws on the work of social science specialists who are well-equipped to analyze these features and to compare them to the analogous aspects of other modern democracies – compels this conclusion: regardless of how one defines “exceptional,” America remains unique in so many ways – with respect to culture, institutions, and public policies -- that the term when used in a descriptive sense unquestionably
applies. In my normative view, many of these exceptional features are praiseworthy (e.g., political stability, decentralization, competitiveness, successful integration of immigrants, vibrant media, a remarkably robust non-profit sector supported by unparalleled private philanthropy). Others are deplorable (e.g., the plague of broken families, growing economic inequality, a culture of adversarial legalism, a demoralized public bureaucracy). For the most part, however, each feature of American life, exceptional or not, mixes good and bad aspects inexorably and inseparably. I like to think that Jim would agree.

3 Ceaser, supra, at 4.
5 Understanding America, p. xi.
6 Id.
But see, Peter H. Schuck, “The Thickest Thicket: Partisan Gerrymandering and the Judicial Regulation of Politics,” Colum. L. Rev. ____.

Democracy in America, Vol. 1, chapter 8.


Cæsar, pp. 8-24.

Wuthnow, pp. 280-82.

Id. at 302-03.

Bayles, chap. 8.

Id. at 242.


Id. at 331-32.

Much of this section is taken from Peter H. Schuck, Understanding America, chap. 12.


Schuck, Citizens, Strangers, and In-Betweens, supra, at 163.


http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/2012/10/health-costs-how-the-us-compares-with-other-countries.html

David Cutler & Patricia Keenan, Understanding America, chap. 15.

Wilson, Understanding America, pp. 479-81.


Id. at 516-21.

Id. at 531-34.

Id. at 534-36.

http://www.charitynavigator.org/index.cfm?bay=content.view&cpid=42

Brooks, Understanding America, chap. 18.

Id. at 544-45.

Id. at 547-49.

Id. at 550-52.

Id. at 554-56.

Id. at 556-58.