

## AMERICAN POLITICS FROM A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

You have probably all heard the phrase “of the people and for the people” when hearing about democratic government, but what does that mean? Why in the United States does “of the people and for the people” equal three branches of government and a U.S. president who generally stays in office for a full term no matter his popularity, but in the United Kingdom it can mean early elections and leaders yanked off the stage when public opinion sways against them? Does democratic government mean the individual with the most votes wins like we see in the United States, or does it signify power sharing and compromise like we see in Italy or Germany? Do other democracies have an electoral college? When Americans hear the word *democracy* they likely think of the president, separation of powers, a winner-take-all election system, and checks and balances. When other countries’ citizens hear the word *democracy*, they probably think of parliaments, proportional representation, and coalition formation. Why would the word *democracy* bring one set of ideas to mind for Americans and yet conjure up an entirely different set of ideas for people living in other democracies? Exploring American politics from a comparative perspective helps to explain why Americans view the meaning and practice of politics differently from other democratic citizens around the world. In 1936, Harold Lasswell famously said that politics is about “who gets what, when and how.”<sup>1</sup> We know, however, that not every government looks the same, and even governments that we group together as democracies do not look the same. Why are they different? If politics really is about “who gets what, when and how,” examining democracies from a comparative perspective helps us to better understand *why* who gets what, when, and how it is similar or different in the United States as compared to other democracies.

### WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO EXAMINE AMERICAN POLITICS FROM A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE?

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American students can often see their friends change over the years in class pictures—from pigtails in elementary school, to awkward middle school years, to the contemplative senior portrait. For those who do not move, students go to school

together for over a decade because the United States typically has a common curriculum from kindergarten through twelfth grade. This means, that for the most part, American kids receive a universal education, with everyone pretty much having the same sort of curriculum in one school building. While there may be tracks within schools, and some kids take AP classes while others don't, you generally see your friends in gym and at lunch and take other classes like sex ed or health all together. Everyone who goes to high school in Bad Axe, Michigan, for example, goes to a universal high school. In other countries, education works differently. In Germany or Austria, kids enter different educational tracks after fifth grade. Teachers, in consultation with parents, recommend kids enter either a college preparatory, technical, or mid-level and lower-level vocational educational track.<sup>2</sup> It is hard to imagine a fifth-grade teacher having as much influence in the United States as to where a parent would send a kid for middle school. Why?

The answer lies in part with the American belief in **individualism**, or the idea of favoring individual freedom of action over collective or state control, as well as the well-developed social welfare system in other countries. In the United States, parents would likely be suspicious of a public official having so much control over determining a child's educational future. Most Americans would also favor allowing the individual child the opportunity to work hard and succeed rather than pre-determining the child's educational attainment. Further, Germans, Austrians, and citizens in other democracies believe more in looking out for the entire society more than individuals, meaning that skilled and unskilled laborers are relatively well paid, with job security, paid vacation, universal health care, and promises of state-funded retirement. So a plumber and a surgeon share common work benefits, making any pressure to attend college less strong in some social democracies than it is in the United States. What is the result? The more collective views of Germans and individualist views of Americans lead to dissimilar acceptance of authority over the individual, which leads to enormous differences on policies such as education, social services, and labor. In short, citizens *expect* and *accept* very different things from their governments.

Gun control provides a poignant example of how these differential expectations play out in real policy debates. In March 1996, a gunman armed with four handguns entered Dunblane Primary School in Dunblane, Scotland. He killed sixteen children and one adult before taking his own life. Less than a year later, the British Parliament decisively passed a law banning private ownership of nearly all guns, which is still in effect today and maintains high levels of public support. In December 2012, a gunman entered Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, killing twenty children and six adults, before taking his own life. In the months that followed, the country remained divided about the best course of action regarding gun control. Congress did not pass any comprehensive legislation; government action came solely in the form of executive orders, not through legislative action; and no substantive changes were made regarding gun ownership in the United States. In fact, there have been almost 300 school shootings since Sandy Hook! Why do we see the stark difference between responses

to similar shootings in the United Kingdom and United States? The answers lie in part with differences in political culture and democratic governmental structure in the United States compared with the culture and democratic structures in the United Kingdom. The emphasis on individual liberties and the difficulty of changing public policy meant that the American response led to more debate over principles than action, whereas the more collectivist views in the United Kingdom and ease of changing policy led to dramatic policy change.

Comparative politics is a subfield of political science just like American politics is a subfield of political science. Yet, while American politics is focused on understanding the political culture, behavior, and institutions in the United States, comparative politics is focused on analyzing and comparing political culture, behavior, and institutions across political systems. Thus, **Americanists**, or political scientists who specialize in American politics, examine how politics works under American democracy. **Comparativists**, or political scientists who specialize in comparative politics, may look at the way in which different democracies behave in different situations, understanding that there are many democracies around the world and that they do not all look the same. To explore American politics from a comparative perspective, then, means asking how politics in the United States is similar to and different from politics in other advanced industrial democracies. For example, why do we see differences in such areas as education, social services, gun control, and fiscal policies, yet we see similarities in terms of competitive party systems, values of freedom, and high levels of economic growth? The United States shares many foundational democratic characteristics with other advanced industrial democracies. We discuss these similarities in Chapter 2. However, the United States also differs from other democracies in terms of political culture, institutions, and political parties and elections, themes explored throughout the book.

## IS AMERICAN DEMOCRACY THE BEST TYPE OF DEMOCRACY?

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The position of the Americans is therefore quite exceptional, and it may be believed that no democratic people will ever be placed in a similar one. . . . Let us cease, then, to view all democratic nations under the example of the American people.<sup>3</sup>

**American exceptionalism** is sometimes used to express the idea that the United States is unique among and superior to other countries. By extension, proponents of American exceptionalism argue that American-styled democracy is the “best” form of government. Alexis de Tocqueville (quoted above) held to the idea that not only is the United States different, but its difference has allowed it to develop the *best* way to organize a government. You may have heard of the idea that the United States is a “City on a Hill.” This language, emanating from the New

Testament, has been used throughout history to refer to the uniqueness, and some believed exceptional nature, of the United States. John Winthrop in 1690 told the Massachusetts Bay colonists that their community would be a “city upon a hill” and watched by the world. This religious-like approach to America’s uniqueness gave rise to the belief that the United States is a special and blessed country and a Shining City upon a Hill, like that discussed in the Bible. In subsequent years, politicians like John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan returned to the City on the Hill metaphor to bring to mind America’s uniqueness and superiority as a beacon of hope for the world.

In other usage, however, American exceptionalism simply means that the United States is different, not better than other countries. Other countries, too, believe that they are an example for the world to follow. In Chapter 3, we explore these varied meanings of American exceptionalism, favoring the idea of looking at how American democracy stacks up against other advanced industrial democracies on objective measures rather than suggesting that American democracy is a better type of democracy. Thus, these authors, while each proud Americans, do not ascribe to the idea that the United States would be the “best” democracy to be emulated the world over. Instead, exceptionalism is an analytical angle with great leverage to explain strengths and quirks in American politics that might otherwise be dismissed as normal or maybe not even be noticed. As we travel through this book, we hope that students read with an eye to understanding why the United States is unique and the best type of democracy for *the American system* but not objectively superior in context than other forms of democracy around the world.

In fact, many scholars of American politics have criticized the narrowness of American political beliefs compared to other democracies. While Tocqueville admired American democracy as noted above, he also said,

I know of no country in which, speaking generally, there is less independence of mind and true freedom of discussion than in America. . . . In America the majority has enclosed thought within a formidable fence. A writer is free inside that area, but woe to the man who goes beyond it.<sup>4</sup>

The uniformity of thought and embrace of individualism leaves Americans feeling threatened by other political beliefs, even if they are modest and democratic. Louis Hartz argued that Americans’ “irrational” devotion to “Americanism” and limited government leads Americans to overreact to other ideologies. This explains why the hysteria that some Americans held socialist thoughts led to the red scare in the 1950s, where some Americans’ civil liberties and civil rights were bulldozed out of fear that communism would spread.<sup>5</sup> Due to this uniformity of thought, Americans do not recognize other ideological beliefs, and modest social welfare spending gets called “socialism” even while it is small relative to any other democracy. Other scholars say that this adherence to limited government and skepticism toward government progressivism leaves the American system unable and unwilling

to deal with pressing issues until there is a crisis—like the Civil War or the Great Depression—when the government has no other choice but to act.<sup>6</sup>

Despite these critiques, American democracy may in fact be the best type of democracy for the United States given the uniqueness of its notions of social contract and political culture; other democracies based upon other notions of social contract and culture have found ways of organizing better suited to their own circumstances. For the sake of analysis, this theme of exceptionalism meaning the *difference* of American government rather than *superiority* of American government will be a theme for inquiry that we carry throughout the book. It is also important to recognize, however, that the United States shares much in common with other advanced industrial democracies. In fact, the United States may not be as dissimilar from other democracies as de Tocqueville or Winthrop thought. Broad commonalities shared as democracies will be explored in Chapter 2. Throughout the book, then, we point out both the similarities and differences between the United States and other democracies as we explore American politics from a comparative perspective.

## WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO EXAMINE AMERICAN POLITICS FROM A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE?

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Public policy is not made from a common viewpoint across democracies. In other words, the policy priorities that a country has are influenced by the political culture and institutions (i.e., parties, elections, electoral law, voting behavior) unique to each country. Often we become trapped in our own conceptions of what is appropriate for public policy challenges, institutions, and appropriate political behavior. Examining American politics from a comparative perspective will allow us to “unpack” some of these preconceptions and better understand American politics by studying how other democracies face challenges and do politics. For example, when a person puts on green-colored glasses, they see their environment as green but cannot detect the color of anything that is green. When another person looks at the same environment through purple colored glasses, the same happens with the color purple. In a sense, Americans are socialized into their political worldview as if the United States had put on a pair of green glasses. The political world is tinted from their established viewpoint. Let’s say Italy’s glasses are purple, and they see the same environment but in purple. While it is natural to have such a worldview and tint based on their particular experiences, Americans cannot distinguish what is green, and Italians cannot discriminate what is purple. These become almost blind spots because of their tinted view. Viewing the environment through another set of glasses can help Americans see the blind spots they would not see otherwise.

*Why* are American politics different? Differences in political history and political culture have led to differences in institutional preferences, manifested in differences in voting behavior. In short, culture and institutions have intermingled to have long-standing influence on the policy preferences and voting behavior

of publics in advanced industrial democracies. American democracy is *one* form of democracy, and when examined comparatively, one learns how American democracy is a unique form of government because culture and institutions have blended in a different way in the United States than they have in other countries. When readers examine each component of American political life comparatively, they will better understand how American democracy is a distinctive form of government and how other democracies function successfully, albeit differently, and readers will more fully understand American politics.

Before we focus on the differences between democratic government practiced in the United States as compared to other countries, we must first understand what these countries have in common. The United States is not the world's only democracy. So what is it that makes a democracy a democracy? Are there common characteristics that all advanced democracies share? Returning to a lens metaphor, when the United States puts on the glasses and looks at a tree, it sees a green tree. When Italy puts on the glasses and looks at the same tree, it still sees the same physical tree; the tree just happens to be purple when viewed through Italian lenses. The same is true with democracy. There are certain core concepts that remain unvarying across all democracies. When the United States looks at these concepts, it sees democracy. When Italy, Australia, Canada, or any other democracy looks at these concepts, they also see democracy. The countries just may look at the world slightly differently, in essence seeing democracy tinted in different ways. We learn in Chapter 2 that the United States has more in common with other democracies than we may think, sharing unique binding characteristics as democracies.

## WHAT TO EXPECT IN THE FOLLOWING CHAPTERS

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In the following chapters we will explore American politics from a comparative perspective. Each chapter will address a new topic, with definitions of key concepts, and then explore how those concepts work comparatively. Breakout boxes and special feature sections will allow in-depth exploration of these concepts in unique ways.

- Chapter 2 will begin by focusing on definitions of democracy and focus on those characteristics the United States shares with other advanced industrial democracies, that is, the broad similarities between the United States and other democracies.
- Chapter 3 will explore the idea of American exceptionalism and focus on the ways in which the United States is different from other democracies by exploring the concepts of liberal democracy and social democracy.
- Chapter 4 deals with political culture, first by defining political culture and discussing how culture is measured, then exploring different types of political culture and comparing American political culture to political

culture in other democracies. This chapter will also examine ideology and the relationships between political culture, social capital, and civic culture.

- Chapter 5 examines the relative protection of civil rights and civil liberties in the United States compared to other democracies. Fitting the American political culture, the American Constitution and Bill of Rights protect civil liberties more vigilantly than do other democracies' constitutions. In turn, the United States has less explicit protections for civil rights due to its political culture, era of constitutionalism, and expression (or lack of expression) of rights and liberties directly in the Constitution and Bill of Rights.
- Chapter 6 explores constitutions further. We begin by defining federal democracy as found in the United States as compared to unitary democracy as found in countries like the United Kingdom and France. We then look at other constitutional differences and similarities such as longevity and majoritarianism versus consociationalism.
- In Chapter 7, we also explore national governing institutions, looking at conceptions of parliamentarism versus presidentialism, two very different, yet successful ways of organizing the executive and legislative branches of democratic systems. We also examine how judicial systems function in the United States as compared to other democracies.
- Chapter 8 looks at interest groups. The chapter begins with a discussion of interest group arrangements found in the United States compared to interest group arrangements found in many other advanced industrial democracies. Interest groups are examined from a life-cycle approach, and both the positive and negative aspects of interest groups as well as the modes of action undertaken by groups are discussed.
- Chapter 9 continues the discussion of interest articulation by addressing political parties. In particular, we discuss how the American two-party system is unique from other multiparty or single-party democratic systems. In order to understand the uniqueness of the American party system, this chapter addresses party formation and how American party formation differed from party formation in other democracies as well as discusses electoral change and value change.
- Chapter 10 examines elections and electoral institutions. The chapter begins by discussing the different types of electoral systems and electoral law in advanced industrial democracies. We explore the ramifications this has on stability of government and representativeness of government.
- Electoral behaviour is discussed in Chapter 11. The chapter delves into political behavior and attitudes of American voters as compared to voters in other democracies. In this chapter, we discuss different approaches to

attitude formation as well as the changing attitudes and voting behavior found in the United States and other advanced democracies.

- Chapter 12 revisits the questions posed in the introduction to this chapter: What does it mean to study American politics from a comparative perspective? *How* and *why* is American democracy different, and what similarities are shared with other advanced industrial democracies? In short, what have we learned from the other chapters in this book?

## HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

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Each chapter is comprised of several components. First, the chapters are subdivided into sections. The section heads alert readers to the important topic covered in the paragraphs that follow. Second, within each section, key terms are bolded. Generally, a definition of the term will follow the term itself. A list of these terms appears at the end of each chapter for study reference. There are also boxes located in each chapter. The boxes should not be seen as supplementary or optional reading; they are integral to understanding the concepts introduced in the chapter. Readers should refer to boxes for explanation, illustration, and deeper understanding of concepts. Some chapters also present graphs, maps, and/or data. These should also be examined closely by readers as they help to explain the concepts introduced in the text. The conclusion of each chapter provides a summary of the material; however, they should not be read instead of the chapters. The summary conclusions should be used to help solidify knowledge gained by reading the full chapters. The “points to remember” provide highlights from each chapter, but again should not be used as a substitute for reading the chapter but as a way to self-test knowledge. The review questions at the end of each chapter can also be used as a way to self-test and think more analytically about topics. Finally, we provide a short list of additional readings at the end of each chapter if you would like to explore further any of the topics covered in this book.

### KEY TERMS

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American  
exceptionalism 3

Americanists 3  
Comparativists 3

Individualism 2

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

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1. What are the distinctions between using American exceptionalism as an admiration of the promise of American democracy used by figures, scholars, and politicians throughout history and the use of American exceptionalism as a mechanism to study the differences in American democracy from other democracies?
2. When President Trump uses “Make American Great Again,” how does this fit with the historically positive view of American exceptionalism and the promise of American democracy and way of life?
3. Louis Hartz discussed the common liberalism of political thought among Americans and warned that it leads Americans to overreact to political thought that is outside the American political norm. Explain how this might explain today’s polarized American politics. At the extremes, for instance, could this help explain the fear of immigration and multiculturalism that has led to some embracing strong right-wing nationalism in response? Does it explain how the fear of populist authoritarianism has led to radical resistance by some of the militant left?

## NOTES

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1. Harold Lasswell, *Politics: Who Gets What, When and How* (New York, NY: Whittlesey House, 1936).
2. While there is some parental choice, school tracking in Austria and Germany is fairly common and has been cause for political concern in recent years. The ÖKD, a political party in Germany, for example, incorporated in their platform the idea of universal education, similar to the United States, as a political reform. When the author’s own children were in school in Austria, for example, there were debates about which school they would attend should they stay in country as their language skills were not strong enough for the highest track school while their academics were.
3. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York, NY: Penguin Classics, 2003), 363.
4. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 1988), 254-255.
5. Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1955), 9-14.
6. Walter Dean Burnham, *Critical Elections and the Mainsprings of American Politics* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 1971).

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