

# Every Country is Unique, But the U.S. is Different

By Everett Carl Ladd

The idea of “American Exceptionalism,” once widely accepted as a key organizing principle for US social and political experience, has over the last quarter century fallen into disfavor. This is unfortunate because, as the data on American ideas shown in the People, Opinions & Polls section (pp. 16-25) indicate clearly, the United States continues to differ *ideologically* from the countries most like us *economically*. What’s more, to the extent this “exceptionalism” has diminished in recent years, it hasn’t done so because *we* have moved at all from our historical commitments.

Alexis de Tocqueville was the first theorist to make the case for American exceptionalism. The US was different from the European mother countries, Tocqueville argued [*Democracy in America*, vol. 1, 1835], because of the way it had experienced the great egalitarian-individualist revolution (which he often called “democratic”) then transforming Western societies: “It has been effected [in the US] with ease and simplicity; say rather that this country is reaping the fruits of the democratic revolution which we are undergoing, without having had the revolution itself. The emigrants who colonized the shores of America in the beginning of the seventeenth century somehow separated the democratic principle from all the principles that it had to contend with in the old communities of Europe, and transplanted it alone to the New World.”

Some who now object to the idea of American exceptionalism do so because they see it as hubristic. Here, “exceptional” is understood by the second of its standard definitions, meaning “excellent” or “superior,” rather than its first, which is “forming an exception or rare instance.” Argument over whether American ideology should be seen as superior to others can never be resolved, of course. But whether it is an exception in the world of modern experience is an empirical question—not one of value

preference. And, recent survey data seem to me to support clearly the conclusion of Tocqueville and many other observers historically, that the United States *is different philosophically*.

The data we present on American ideas and ideals come from a new survey designed specifically to explore the subject, done by the Roper Center for *Reader’s Digest*; and for the comparative dimension, from three major cross-national studies conducted in the 1990s: The World Values Survey, done in 1990-93 by the World Values Study Group; various of the annual survey modules done for International Social Survey Project (ISSP), especially the 1992 module on equality; and surveys taken in the US and across much of Europe in 1991 by Princeton Survey Research Associates for the Times Mirror Company.

Equality, a central ideal in all democratic systems, isn’t understood the same everywhere. *Juridical equality*—“one man, one vote,” equal standing before the law—wasn’t established in the Europe of Tocqueville’s time; now it is as firmly a part of the western European as of the American tradition. Once we get beyond legal status, however, views diverge. In the US, equality remains understood in highly individualist terms. We come down on the side of equality of *opportunity*, not of *result*. Government action to equalize results—by reducing income differences or guaranteeing a basic income—gets far more backing in most of Europe than it does here (p. 20).

In general, Americans are less inclined to back governmental action than are Europeans. The flip side is that we are more inclined to emphasize individual initiatives through private philanthropy and voluntary action as the best means of addressing social needs (pp. 21-23). Tocqueville saw this more than a century and a half ago. He wrote in the second volume of the *Democracy* [1839] that “the Americans make associations to give entertainments, to found

seminaries, to build inns, to construct churches, to diffuse books, to send missionaries to the antipodes; in this manner they found hospitals, prisons, and schools. . . . Thus the most democratic country on the face of the earth is that in which men have, in our time, carried to the highest perfection the art of pursuing in common the object of their common desires. . . . Is this the result of accident, or is there in reality any necessary connection between the principle of association and that of equality?” His answer, of course, was that there is a profound connection.

Tocqueville’s famous description of America as distinctively a nation of joiners—driven by a confidence in individual initiative, a sense of individual responsibility, and an aversion to government direction—is borne out fully by contemporary survey findings.

Finally, in pages 24-25, we compare the US to other countries in terms of the strength of religious values. Here, again, we remain the great exception among our peers. The United States is among the most highly developed countries in socioeconomic terms—arguably the first “postindustrial society.” But, contrary to the experience in other advanced industrial democracies, the US shows no signs of abandoning its distinctive religiosity.

The world is changing rapidly. Individualism is on the march politically and economically. This broad development may one day close a major chapter in the story of American exceptionalism. Again, Tocqueville foresaw it: “I confess that in America I saw more than America; I sought there the image of democracy itself, with its inclinations, its character, its prejudices, and its passions, in order to learn what we have to fear or to hope from its progress.”

