# Understanding America

*As in de Tocqueville's time, American culture, politics, and economics stand apart from the rest of the world.*

*By Peter H. Schuck*

ONE HUNDRED AND SEVENTY-FIVE years ago, Alexis de Tocqueville visited America and concluded that our fledgling mass democracy was exceptional among nations. But today, robust liberal democracy is no longer an American monopoly. Many other nations elect their leaders in fair elections and have legal safeguards for individual rights similar to those protected by our Constitution. Indeed, their laws sometimes confer rights that ours do not. So how special are we?

Commentators have almost always discussed this question at a high level of abstraction. Americans are more individualistic. We never had a strong socialist movement or a workers' party characteristic of other democracies. Our welfare state is pitiless, and our social safety net has holes. We are more suspicious of government power and believe more in markets.

Although true, these generalizations actually tell us very little about the extraordinary complexities and singularities of American life. To understand them, we must focus on the specific institutions, public policies, and cultural patterns that constitute the American system and compare them with conditions in other advanced democracies.

In a new book, *Understanding America: The Anatomy of an Exceptional Nation* (Public Affairs, 2008), political scientist James Q. Wilson and I have attempted to do just that. We recruited 20 of America's most distinguished social scientists to each write a chapter on a particular institution, domestic policy area, or culture on which he or she is an expert. We asked them to look at the major challenges confronting their subject area and the principal options for meeting them. In effect, the book seeks to break down the overbroad notion of American exceptionalism into its many component parts.

Taken as a whole, the book shows that America is indeed different from other democracies and in some ways has grown more different over time. These differences exist in the spheres of culture, politics, economics, law, and civil society. For example, our cultural traits are vastly different from those found in other liberal democracies. Some of those distinctive traits are:

- **PATRIOTISM.** When The Pew Research Center polled some 91,000 people in 50 nations, it found that 71 percent of Americans were "very proud" to be in America, while only 38 percent of the French and 21 percent of the Germans and Japanese said they were proud to live in their countries. The display of flags, national symbols, and patriotic bumper stickers, so common in American life, puzzles Europeans, as does the sense of national mission and idealism that always affects America's civic life and foreign policy.
- **INDIVIDUALISM.** Americans, far more than Europeans, believe that success is determined by their own efforts rather than by forces outside their own control. When asked whether they "completely agree" that the government should provide a safety net, only one-third of Americans say yes, compared to 60 percent or more in most European countries. Americans emphasize individual rights in every area of social life while disfavoring group rights. We also disparage our political institutions, especially Congress and the bureaucracy, while revering the constitutional system that created them. This individualistic American ethos is manifested in our religion, economy, legal system, and almost every other area of life.
- **RELIGIOSITY.** A far higher percentage of Americans attend religious services than do Europeans (except in Ireland and Poland). Nearly half of Americans attend religious services each week, compared to 4 percent of the English and 5 percent of the French. Church leaders and their flocks have led almost all of the reformist causes in American history: abolition, women's suffrage, temperance, civil

United States of America

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rights, opposition to unpopular wars, and environmentalism. One reason for this pronounced religiosity is that creating and sustaining churches was never in the hands of the federal government and only briefly in those of the first states. Instead, unlike in Europe, religious development was promoted by spiritual entrepreneurs engaged in competitive marketing, vigorous proselytizing, and doctrinal and liturgical innovations. Immigration, moreover, has fortified this religious commitment throughout American history.

■ **ENTERPRISE.** Well more than half of all Americans think that economic competition is desirable because it stimulates people to work hard. In comparison, only one-third of French and Spanish people agree. Americans are far more likely than Europeans to think that their children should be taught these values. These entrepreneurial beliefs extend to almost all areas of social life, including the remarkably dynamic realms of popular culture, the mass media, and political culture.

Our political system is similarly unique. Many democracies have constitutions, but America's is unique for both its longevity and the political system it created. The Congress, for example, is almost certainly the most powerful legislature, both constitutionally and functionally, in the world. It is not a tool of the executive branch, even when the president's party controls the House and Senate. Like Congress's power to shape executive action, the federal and state courts constrain the actions of both agencies and legislatures—and in a real sense, make law.

Our legal system is far more accessible to the people, including litigants, and more strongly oriented toward individual rights at the expense of governmental and social claims. The First Amendment more broadly protects expression of all kinds—political advocacy, speechlike behavior (e.g., picketing and wearing message-bearing clothing), commercial advertising, indecent speech, and outrageous utterances. (Some European constitutional courts have begun to emulate this long-unique feature of American constitutionalism.)

The American system of federalism means that much more law is local than in most other democracies. This localism especially affects criminal justice and enforcement policies. Every district attorney, mayor, and governor, as well as many judges, are elected by their communities, and this political accountability has made the American policy response to crime stronger, swifter, and more incarceration-oriented than in the United Kingdom and Europe. Majorities support the death penalty in the United States, the U.K., and Europe, but only America and Japan, among democratic nations, legislate it. Whether policy relates to political parties, stem cell research, criminal justice, controlled substances, education, or other subjects, the American public law system remains far more decentralized than its European counterparts.

Our economy also sets us apart from other democracies. The U.S. economy is more decentralized than in Europe and Japan. Remarkably flexible and competitive, it features a largely unregulated, highly mobile labor market that imposes few constraints on companies and rewards workers who can shift from dying industries to growth sectors. It is also unique among advanced democracies in achieving a sustained record of growth, job creation, and a widespread distribution of ownership. The regulatory environment, compared with its more intrusive foreign counterparts, encourages entrepreneurship and new business formation. (It may also encourage some corporate abuses, as in the subprime mortgage meltdown.)

A more worrisome feature of the American economy is the pace and shape of social mobility. The iconic Horatio Alger rags-to-riches myth that inspired so many Americans in the past may be increasingly just that: a myth. Mobility in the U.S. today—perhaps because of the school system's failures in educating children from low-income families—is no longer particularly high when compared with mobility in some European states, and may be declining over time. This is a cause for grave concern.

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**DIVERSITY.** America's embrace of ethnoracial diversity, according to sociologist Orlando Patterson, "finds no parallel in any other society or culture in the world today." This embrace was not always ardent. Slaveholders, eugenicists, monolingual diehards, and many others opposed diversity on principle. Today, however, almost all Americans see it as part of the national mythos. The U.S. welcomes approximately 1 million legal immigrants each year, while tolerating another estimated 12 million undocumented ones. In the most telling sign of a tolerant, integrating society, interethnic and interracial marriage is substantial and steadily rising.

In Europe, immigrants are mostly from former colonies, and they are not usually welcomed or well integrated. Today, almost every polyglot nation is at serious risk of fragmenting into ethnic shards, and even strong unitary states like the U.K., Spain, France, and China, and religiously homogeneous states like Belgium, are being roiled by militant demands for devolution or even full independence. In contrast, the U.S. has maintained its social and political cohesion, and has done so without sacrificing its economic, social, and cultural dynamism. By any standard, this represents an exceptional national achievement. It is attributable in part to the unquestioned primacy of the English language throughout the U.S., even among the children of immigrants, and to a first-past-the-post electoral system (shared by the U.K., Canada, and Japan) that generates less conflict (and less income redistribution) than the proportional representation systems prevalent in Europe.

American civil society—the array of groups and institutions that stand between the individual and the state—is extraordinarily robust in almost every respect. The lone exception to this strength may be the most important one—the family.

> American politics and culture are different from those of other democracies, and have grown more so over time.

As noted earlier, religion provides immense cultural resources to individuals and communities. Private philanthropic giving—to secular causes as well as religious ones—is unmatched anywhere in the world. These charitable donations, moreover, are made disproportionately by those with modest incomes. Private charity in the U.S. supports a vast, diverse array of local, regional, and national nonprofit organizations—schools, hospitals, religious institutions, and a host of others—that provide social services to the needy and other members of the public. They also provide many more avenues than in other countries for citizen participation in larger collective endeavors.

In America, private institutions perform many functions that are reserved to government in Europe. Private institutions dominate higher education, while also playing a leading role in elementary and secondary education for elites and lower-income students alike. Much the same pattern prevails in health care—to the consternation of many health policy analysts who prefer a more centrally coordinated or funded system. With a public more confident in nonprofit organizations than governmental ones, policymakers have created a large number of public-private partnerships in fields as diverse as housing and community development, scientific research, environmental protection, immigrant integration, public safety, and many areas of regulatory policy.

This upbeat picture of civil society, however, is seriously marred by the deep pathologies that afflict many low-income communities and

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help to create a small but durable "underclass." This problem shadows almost every aspect of American life. The disturbing trends in nonmarital births, family dissolution, and children growing up without paternal guidance constitute America's single most urgent and (at least so far) intractable social problem.

To address these deplorable social conditions, governments in the U.S. and Europe have adopted many welfare programs. The U.S., however, is usually criticized as a "welfare state laggard" because of the absence of the kinds of universal health care programs, family allowances, and extended unemployment and other worker benefits established long ago in other countries. Although the differences between the American and European social systems are indeed great, standard comparisons are invariably simplistic and miss some of the distinctive features of American social policy.

First, many benefits provided by the American welfare state are the product of policy instruments whose costs are not wholly reflected on public budgets. Tax credits and subsidies finance benefits that in many other countries are directly provided by government. In addition, the states finance much of the costs of many U.S. social programs, most notably Medicaid and worker benefits. Including these off-budget "tax expenditures" and nonfederal payments in the tally would make the American welfare state comparable to its foreign counterparts.

Second, some of the largest and most important of our antipoverty programs—food stamps and the Earned Income Tax Credit, for example—have expanded significantly in recent decades. At the same time, many European counties are beginning to cut back in light of the growing fiscal burdens of their welfare programs. These burdens are likely to become more severe in Europe than here, largely because of more adverse demographic trends. And while the U.S. has begun to make the difficult political and programmatic adjustments required by the more constrained fiscal environment, European systems have so far failed to do so.

Perhaps no contemporary aspect of American life is more exceptional than its relatively high fertility rate and consequent population growth. This demographic exceptionalism reflects America's immigration and its  greater optimism about the future, which in turn may reflect its greater religiosity and immigrant cultures. America's demography has immense implications for economic growth, family structure, the design of welfare state programs, popular culture, immigration, and many other of the institutions, practices, and policy debates analyzed in this book.

American exceptionalism helps explain some social patterns that would otherwise seem incongruous, even perverse. Individualism, economic productivity and flexibility, and a powerful popular culture feed mass consumerism. This consumerism is tempered, however, by a persistent idealism and a strong commitment to civil liberties, even in times of war. The constitutionally constrained reach of the federal government limits the amount of money spent on welfare, but limited welfare encourages an unparalleled commitment to private philanthropy and voluntary organizations. Americans distrust many of their governmental institutions but venerate their Constitution and the personal freedoms that it protects, freedoms that in turn create and shape those public institutions.

America's main problems today—a large underclass, the continuing isolation of many blacks, reduced economic mobility, a deeply polarized electorate, substance abuse among the young, many families in crisis, and a popular culture that is at once immensely creative and often debased—have many causes. One of those causes is freedom, which carries with it large and unfortunate costs. And "freedom" is America's watchword.

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