AMERICAN POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT:
TOPIC: THE PUZZLE OF AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

Why did the United States never develop a robust socialist tradition comparable to say France or Germany? Why is economic inequality so much greater in the U.S. than in almost every other advanced industrial democracy? Why, too, does the United States stand virtually alone among western democracies in continuing to use capital punishment, and why does the U.S. have incarceration rates that are far, far higher than other industrial democracies?

These and other similar questions (e.g., why no national health insurance in the U.S., why is the U.S. a welfare state “laggard”) are at the core of what social scientists and historians term “American exceptionalism.” In this course, we will explore the concept of American exceptionalism, not as a normative claim (is America the best—or worst—in the world?) but as a sociological or empirical phenomenon. We will interrogate whether it is true that the United States differs fundamentally from other western democracies. In what ways, if any, is the U.S. an outlier among western democracies, and in what ways does the United States resemble other democratic nations? To the extent that the United States is distinctive, what explains the differences between the United States and other advanced industrial societies? Is it the nation’s political institutions, and if so, which ones. Is it the separation of powers, federalism, or maybe the judiciary? Alternatively, does the key to the puzzle lie in the nation’s political culture and political ideology, particularly its liberal, antistatist tradition? Or do the answers lie in America’s distinctive racial past or perhaps in its extraordinary religiosity? Or should we seek the answers instead in the “path-dependent” patterns of political development related to suffrage and state-building?

To help us answer these questions, we will read analyses by political scientists, historians, sociologists, and legal scholars. The books that must be purchased (please no e-books) are Peter Baldwin, The Narcissism of Minor Differences: How America and Europe Are Alike (Oxford University Press, 2009), Sven Steinmo, The Evolution of Modern States: Sweden, Japan, and the United States (Cambridge University Press, 2010), Erik Bleich, The Freedom to be Racist?: How the United States and Europe Struggle to Preserve Freedom and Combat Racism (Oxford University Press, 2011), and Seymour Martin Lipset, American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword (Norton 1996). In addition we will read many articles and book chapters (all of which are available on WISE) that employ a cross-national perspective to explore different policy areas.

The emphasis in this course is on close reading and discussion of texts. Because the course is discussion based, it is imperative that you do the reading for each class session. At times the reading is heavy, so it is incumbent upon each of you to manage your time wisely so that you are able to come to every class prepared to discuss the readings. Class participation will figure heavily (40 percent) in your final grade. If you miss a class, whether excused or unexcused, you must write a 750 word paper analyzing the reading that was assigned for the day you miss. Your participation grade in the course will be lowered by half a grade for every short paper you do not turn in within a week of your return to class. More than two unexcused absences will result in a full grade deduction from your final course grade; each additional absence will result in an additional deduction of one full grade from your final grade. Persistent
lateness or failure to prepare adequately for class discussions can also result in deductions from the final grade.

The major requirements for the course are a take-home midterm essay due Friday, October 2nd (worth 20 percent of your grade), a final paper due Saturday, December 12 at 4pm (worth 30 percent), and an oral presentation during the final few weeks (worth 10 percent).

The ultimate aim of this course is not only to enable you to place American politics and policy in comparative perspective but to prepare you for the Politics Department senior thesis by prompting you to think about political research in terms of puzzles to be posed and answered.

The final “paper” is explicitly designed as a stepping stone to the senior thesis. It will be different from the papers you are accustomed to writing because rather than write a complete research paper you will assemble the building blocks of a what could subsequently be developed into a longer research paper. This exercise will provide you with the experience of what it’s like to begin to put together a thesis. If you select a topic you like you may even want to develop the work in your senior thesis. But even if you choose not to pursue the topic further, you will still have had valuable practice in the skills you will need to compose a senior thesis.

For the final paper, you will select a topic and compare the United States with one or two comparable countries. Topics might include—but definitely are not limited to—gun control, abortion and contraception, same-sex marriage, the right to die, arts funding, dress codes in public schools, the war on drugs, obesity, drinking and driving, immigration, affirmative action, multiculturalism and diversity, immigration, climate change, consumer safety, genetically modified foods, energy policy, vacation time, public transportation, housing policy, and agricultural policy.

The final paper—4,500 to 5,000 words in total—will consist of the following parts:
1. A one sentence statement of the puzzle that animates your research project.
2. An annotated bibliography of between 6 and 8 sources. Each annotation should summarize the argument and evidence of the book/article/chapter/report/document in no more than 250 words. Total length of the annotated bibliography should be between 1,500 and 2,000 words.
3. A 1,000-1,500 word description of the relevant differences and/or similarities between the United States and the other country or countries you have selected for comparison.
4. Two or three figures, tables, or graphs that visually illustrate the relevant differences and/or similarities between the United States and the other county or countries.
5. A 1,000-1,500 word section that identifies and describes at least three possible theories or explanations that might account for the observed differences. Identify the explanation that you think provides the best fit with the data you have gathered, and explain why you find it the most satisfactory explanation of the observed differences (or similarities). This section should explicitly address whether the concept of American exceptionalism holds up to empirical scrutiny.

Due on Friday, November 6 at 5pm is your preliminary idea for a paper topic, communicated to me via email. Ideally, the email would also identify the countries that you will compare (one of which is obviously the U.S.). And, in the best case scenario, the email would also include a preliminary statement of the research puzzle. I will use these paper topics to schedule and group the presentations in the final three weeks.
Willamette’s Credit Hour Policy holds that for every hour of class time there is an expectation of 2-3 hours work outside of class. Thus, you should anticipate spending at least 6-9 hours each week outside of class engaged in course-related activities, such as studying, reading, and writing. Please tell me about any disabilities that will affect your participation in this course and any accommodations authorized by the Office of Disabilities Services. I expect you to be familiar with Willamette’s Plagiarism and Cheating Policy, which is available at http://www.willamette.edu/cla/dean/policies/plagiarism.html.

My office is Smullin 324. Office hours are TH 10:30-12:45, and by appointment (my email is rellis@willamette.edu).

I. Classic Questions
1.1 (Aug. 25) Introduction

1.2 (Aug. 27) The Concept of American Exceptionalism
Lipset, *American Exceptionalism*, 13-76

2.1 (Sept. 1) Why no Socialism in the United States?
Lipset, *American Exceptionalism*, 77-109

2.2 (Sept. 3) No class

3.1 (Sept. 8) Is it the Culture or Institutions?

3.2 (Sept. 10) Is the United States a Welfare State Laggard (and if so, why)?
Baldwin, *The Narcissism of Minor Differences*, 40-73
4.1 (Sept. 15) Why is there so much Economic Inequality in the United States?
Alfred Stepan and Juan J. Linz, “Comparing Perspectives on Inequality and the Quality
of Democracy in the United States,” *Perspectives on Politics* (December 2011), 841-856
Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson, *Winner-Take-All Politics: How Washington Made the
Rich Richer—and Turned Its Back on the Middle Class* (Simon and Schuster, 2010), 11-40.

II. Divergence in a Globalizing World

4.2 (Sept. 17) The Evolution of Modern States: The Case of Sweden
Steinmo, *The Evolution of Modern States*, 1-87

5.1 (Sept. 22) The Evolution of Modern States: The Case of Japan
Steinmo, *The Evolution of Modern States*, 88-148

5.2 (Sept. 24) The Evolution of Modern States: The Case of the United States
Steinmo, *The Evolution of Modern States*, 149-233
Baldwin, *The Narcissism of Minor Differences*, 204-249

6.1 (Sept. 29) The Case of Religion
Steven Pfaff, “Religious Divide: Why Religion Seems to Be Thriving in the United States
and Waning in Europe,” in Jeffrey Kopstein and Sven Steinmo, eds., *Growing Apart:
America and Europe in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge University Press, 2008),
24-52
Baldwin, *Narcissism of Minor Differences*, 163-175

6.2 (Oct. 1) Is American Conservativism Exceptional?
John Micklethwait and Adrian Woolridge, “Heresy and Reformation: America’s
Exceptional Conservatism,” in *The Right Nation: Conservative Power in America*
(Penguin 2004), 334-353

Take-Home Essay due Friday, October 2, at 5pm.

III. Exploring Varieties of American Exceptionalism

7.1 (Oct. 6) Capital Punishment
Carol S. Steiker, “Capital Punishment and American Exceptionalism,” in Michael Ignatieff, ed.,
David Garland, *Peculiar Institution: America’s Death Penalty in an Age of Abolition* (Harvard
University Press, 2010), 9-24, 39-55, 308-313

7.2 (Oct. 8) The Carceral State
Times*, August 24, 2012


8.1 (Oct. 13) Felon Voting Rights


Mary Katzenstein, Leila Mohsen Ibrahim, and Katharine D. Rubin, “Felony Disenfranchisement and the Dark Side of American Liberalism,” Perspectives on Politics (December 2010), 1035-1054

8.2 (Oct. 15) Disability Rights


9.1 (Oct. 20) Hate Speech
Bleich, Freedom to be Racist, 3-5, 17-81


9.2 (Oct. 22) Banning Racist Groups
Bleich, Freedom to be Racist, 85-139, 152-155

10.1 (Oct. 27) Regulating Risk

10.2 (Oct. 29) High-Speed Rail

11.1 (Nov. 3) Education

Baldwin, Narcissism of Minor Differences, 97-106
11.2 (Nov. 5) Smoking and Public Health

12.1 (Nov. 10) Gay Rights
Stephen C. Craig et al., “Core Values, Value Conflict, and Citizens' Ambivalence about Gay Rights,” Political Research Quarterly (March 2005), 5-17

12.2 (Nov. 12) Soccer
Andrei Markovits and Steven Hellerman, Offside: Soccer and American Exceptionalism (Princeton University Press, 2001), 7-51

IV. Student Research
13.1 (Nov. 17) Student Presentations
13.2 (Nov. 19) Student Presentations
14.1 (Nov. 24) Student Presentations
14.2 (Nov. 26) No class, Thanksgiving
15.1 (Dec. 1) Student Presentations
15.2 (Dec. 3) Student Presentations