

AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

At the winter Olympics in South Korea in 2018, you could see people wrapped and decorated with the flags of the different countries competing. Many Americans were among them, wrapped in the stars and stripes of the American flag. When the Olympics ended, most fans put away their flags and patriotic wear until the next Olympics or worldwide sporting event. This is not as much the case for American fans. When you travel around the United States, it is not uncommon to see the American flag flying everywhere—from your local McDonald's to churches, to car dealerships to people's own front lawns. In other countries, this is less of the case. In other countries, you are less likely to see a flag flying from any building other than government buildings. While in the United States it is almost a requisite that you fly a flag several times a year, in Germany, for example, in part because of their dodgy past with nationalism, people would look at you strangely if you had a flagpole raised in your yard. In fact, when Germany won the Soccer World Cup in 1990, some Germans commented how proud they were of their team but had reservations about the level of flag waving. The ubiquitous patriotic displays in the United States fit with Americans' historical sense of being special or exceptional. But, what does it mean to say that the United States is exceptional?

In Chapter 2 we discussed the many similarities between the United States and other advanced industrial democracies. The United States is similar to other democracies when we examine democratic practice, competition (contestation), participation, freedom, socioeconomic, and even frustrations. This raises the question, if democracies are so similar, why do scholars discuss American exceptionalism? Part of the answer stems from the very different focus of scholarship between scholars who study American politics—referred to as **Americanists**—and those who compare aspects of governance among different countries, referred to as **comparativists**. Most Americanists focus in great depth on specific areas of American political institutions, parties, interest groups, or political behavior, and for good reason, most American politics textbooks draw from the detailed work of Americanists. Thus, when some scholars look at the United States relative to other advanced industrial democracies, it can lead them to view the United States as unusual, unique, or even special. In fact, early observers of American democracy, like Alexis de Tocqueville (see Box 3.1), noted the unique aspects of

American democracy. In the past, some people have referred to this idea of the United States as special, or superior, as American exceptionalism; however, this is an incorrect understanding of the term. Viewing the United States as special distorts a comparative look at American democracy. The scholarly definition of **American exceptionalism** focuses not on the degree to which the United States is superior to other countries but instead on how the United States is *different* from other advanced industrial democracies. This is because the true meaning of exceptionalism is not superiority or special but unique. When we consider the root of exceptionalism is *exception*, we can better understand American exceptionalism as the idea that the United States is an exception, or sometimes different than, other democracies.

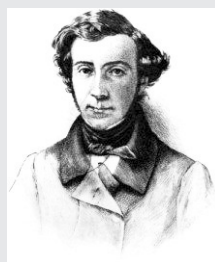
The key component of the answer as to why the United States is different lies in the significant difference in the founding conditions in the United States compared to other countries. Those conditions and subsequent political life have predisposed Americans to view what makes government **legitimate**, or popularly accepted, differently from citizens of other advanced industrial democracies. When a government has legitimacy, it is seen as having the right to rule. In other words, when citizens view a government as legitimate, they accept that government's authority. De Tocqueville and others saw citizen deliberative experiences, such as town hall meetings, as an opportunity to build not only ties among citizens but also the legitimacy of the governmental system.

BOX 3.1

Alexis de Tocqueville

Alexis de Tocqueville (July 29, 1805–April 16, 1859) was a French thinker and historian who most famously wrote the two-volume *Democracy in America* based on his observations from travels in the United States. He is credited with providing an early basis of work for sociology and political science, particularly in the United States. De Tocqueville wrote of his travels through America during the time of President Andrew Jackson, when the fabric of American life was under dramatic transformation. He wanted to elucidate the difference between the fading aristocratic order in France and the “new” democratic order emerging in the United States.

De Tocqueville, ever the supporter of liberty, remarked on the American penchant for liberty and



► **Photo 3.1** Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (1899), accessed via Wikimedia Commons.

equality. He also is known for his affection for American-styled citizen involvement, where he spoke highly of the New England town hall–styled democracy and **associational life**, where people form and rely upon social networks, as a way for Americans to come together and forge an American consciousness and solve problems. He saw deliberation, consensus building, and decision making among citizens as a way to forge a stronger and better democracy. We see his legacy today in town halls and citizen participation across the United States.

DIFFERING VIEWS OF GOVERNING LEGITIMACY

Humans do not weigh all experiences equally. Rather, some memories and experiences in our life forever shift views of how the world works and propel us toward certain careers or even ways of life. Such formative events tend to strike people in their adolescence, high school, or college years and likely imprint particular worldviews from that point forward. You have likely experienced friends who had very different experiences than you in these times, and despite your previously close relationship, you just have not remained as close because one or both of you “changed”—you both may not understand “what happened” to the other to make them the way they are today. Countries may have similar decisive “adolescent” experiences that crystallize particular views of how governance should operate. In other words, other nations scratch their head and wonder why American politics is odd.

One formative event in the “adolescence” of a country is the nature of the democratic revolutionary moment of a people, or the historical conditions and popular wisdom at the time a nation democratized. Why would Americans choose to view their government as legitimate when other democracies, sharing democratic values and love of freedom, choose their own patterns of **legitimate government**? Social contract theorists were political philosophers who answered this sort of question (see Box 3.2). Beginning in the **Enlightenment Era** (late seventeenth through eighteenth centuries)—in Western philosophical, intellectual, and scientific life where reason was advocated as the primary source of legitimacy and sway, and traditional beliefs and authority were questioned—these theorists argued that government legitimacy came from citizens entering a **social contract**, or the implicit agreement among citizens to grant government legitimacy in exchange for certain protections from the state. As political philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) then argued, people proactively decide to leave the anarchy and danger that would exist among people in an ungoverned world—what these theorists termed the **state of nature**. Thus, legitimacy of government came from people deciding to be governed rather than legitimacy coming from the **Divine Right of Kings**, the idea that a monarch gains legitimacy from God, which defined why royalty held government legitimacy prior to this philosophical

challenge. While all democracies ultimately share the view that government gains its legitimacy from the people, the nature of what government should ultimately be doing to fulfill its end of the contract differs by the conditions a country faced as it democratized. In the case of the United States, its democratic revolutionary moment borrowed directly from social contract theorist John Locke, who said that only governments that were limited would be legitimate.

BOX 3.2

Enlightenment Thinkers¹

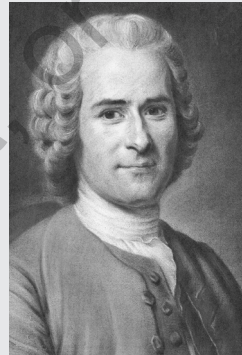


► **Photo 3.2** John Locke, Library of Congress, www.loc.gov.

John Locke was an English philosopher and physician who lived from August 9, 1632 to October 28, 1704. An important philosopher of the Enlightenment Era, his thoughts on liberalism greatly influenced American thinking at the formation of the country and today. His thoughts are reflected in liberal democracies. Locke coined the idea that governments ought not to infringe on the life, liberty, or property of citizens if they are to be legitimate.

We see his ideas enshrined in the United States' Constitution, making the United States very much "locked into Locke."

French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) focused thoughts on the common good, arguing for placing the common good above individual rights and private property. His thoughts are reflected in social democracies' emphasis on social welfare and state responsibility to citizens.



► **Photo 3.3** Maurice Quentin de LaTour, "Portrait of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778)," accessed via Wikimedia Commons.

According to Locke's view of the social contract, government arises out of an agreement among people and a willingness to be governed and collectively follow given rules. Additionally, government provides an ordered society. Locke also believed that people have particular "natural rights"—from the state of nature—and a legitimate government should never take these rights away. These natural rights, according to Locke, are life, liberty, and property. When Thomas

Jefferson eloquently penned America's reason for splitting from England, he borrowed directly from Locke and his notion of legitimacy by inserting a slightly changed form of Locke's natural rights in the Declaration of Independence—*life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness*—to explain why the English king had violated the social contract and was no longer legitimately the leader of the American people.

For Americans, Jefferson's borrowing of Locke's phrase captured their belief that unalienable rights were not given to citizens by the government but by their Creator and could not be taken away from them by government. In fact, Americans did not just use Locke for the Declaration of Independence but have continually returned to the protection of individual life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness (or property) as necessary conditions for government to be considered legitimate. When the United States' first constitution—the Articles of Confederation—could not protect the individual unalienable rights of American citizens due to **tyranny of the majority**, or the idea that the majority can pursue choices that are not favorable to the minority whose rights are not protected, the framers of the Constitution met to reinvent American institutions to make them less open to democratic pressure in order to protect individual liberties. In particular, under the Articles of the Confederation, citizens' property rights were threatened from riots and rebellions against lenders foreclosing on debtors' land, so the authors of the Constitution rebalanced the trade-offs of democratic rule relative to individual protection of liberty with the latter winning out.

Anti-Federalist critics felt the Constitution would not limit government power enough relative to citizen rights. Indeed, *Anti-Federalist 1* predicted some of the frustrations Americans express with the size and scope of today's federal government. Ultimately, as a concession to Anti-Federalist concerns, the Bill of Rights—the first ten amendments to the Constitution—specifically highlighted key citizen rights the government could not take away (see Chapter 5 for more on this). Not surprisingly, the Fifth Amendment lists the many conditions under which the government cannot hold or prosecute citizens. This includes the limitations that people cannot “be deprived of life, liberty or property, without due process of law; nor shall private property be taken for public use, without just compensation.”

Unfortunately prior to the Civil War, the Supreme Court cited the very concept of life, liberty, and property as the reason why former slave Dred Scott was not free despite being in a free state. Because Scott was not a citizen he did not have rights, and because the government could not legitimately take away a citizen's property, which Scott was considered to be in slavery, Scott's freedom was revoked because of his former slaveowner's property rights. Later, after the Civil War, Americans explicitly articulated that states could not take away their citizens' rights of “Life, Liberty, and Property” without a due process of law in the Fourteenth Amendment. This is not a debate that was put to bed in the 1800s. In 2018, the Supreme Court ruled in a 5 to 4 ruling on *Trump v. Hawaii* that the United States could ban travelers from certain countries (known as the Trump travel ban

or Executive Order 13769 and Presidential Proclamation 9465). Again, because they were not citizens, travelers to the United States did not have the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and the majority opinion ruled that President Trump had made a sufficient national security argument to disfavor some countries citizens' travel to the United States.

With life, liberty, and property—or the pursuit of happiness—always at its centerpiece, Americans have viewed government's legitimate role as extremely limited in their lives (liberty) and in the marketplace (property). Scholars of American exceptionalism note the particularly deeply ingrained “Lockean liberalism” of American political life as something which marks the United States as unique.

Locke was not the only social contract theorist, and other societies viewed the notions of legitimacy put forward by other social contract theorists as superior. French thinker Jean-Jacques Rousseau thought that legitimate government produced the **common good**—or so-called by Rousseau, collective will (common interest)—and while recognizing that humans are naturally free, was more willing to place collective will above individual rights as the central pursuit of a legitimate government.² (See Box 3.2) For example, he argued that while some people were endowed with natural abilities in science or industry, the advances those people made should benefit all of society, both financially and in terms of quality of life. Thus, he was more likely to support limitations on private property ownership and profit. As we will see shortly, this view of the collective will fit better with the views of other democracies' citizens in their democratic revolutions. So a key difference between the United States and other democracies stems from a philosophical view of legitimate government and the balance between individual citizen liberties and collective will.

The unique nature of this view of legitimacy is not simply an old-world vs. new-world distinction. When Canada formed its first government not directly governed by the United Kingdom, it authorized that the Canadian government should “make laws for the peace, order, and good government of Canada”—a sharp distinction from notions of government being limited so as not to threaten life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness seen in the United States' founding. Further, notions of the collective will being paramount to individual liberties were codified into the constitutions of these democracies as will be highlighted in later sections. In sum, relative to other democracies, the notion of American governmental legitimacy rests on liberty and independence.

FUNCTIONAL EXPLANATIONS FOR AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

A distinct chicken-and-egg dilemma exists when trying to explain just how much Locke's view of protection of liberties drove Americans' subsequent beliefs in and attraction to limited government or whether Americans' love of liberty just made Locke's arguments more attractive. Most likely both help to explain the distinctiveness of Americans' political beliefs. Certainly the historical conditions Americans

experienced helped to formulate American political beliefs and these beliefs subsequently have stayed in the collective American conscience over time. That is, the American experience led the United States down one political path while other democracies chose another path. According to such path-dependent explanations, we cannot explain contemporary distinctions among these democracies without explaining the divergent directions these countries chose hundreds of years ago. **Path-dependent explanations** are those where outcomes of the present are determined by decisions made or circumstances presented in the past. Two fundamental and interconnected explanations put forward by scholars of American exceptionalism help to explain the difference in the United States.

1. **The self-selection of who came to America.** It took a particularly risk-taking individual to decide to leave everything behind to travel to live in a new world sight unseen. As American political scientist Louis Hartz (1919–1986) noted, this voyage to the new world highlights a spirit of individual independence.³ Scholars broadly highlight the self-selection of colonial Americans as a key influence on the subsequent focus on United States individualism. Obviously this explanation is not universal. Hundreds of thousands of slaves were brought in chains as property and not due to a free-will itch that needed to be scratched. Further, the old world did not completely empty out its risk takers in America. Nevertheless, a substantial portion of the American public ended up predisposed to view the rewards of life coming from individual risk taking rather than collective outcomes. This continues today in the national narrative that “if you work hard you can succeed” and the idea of “picking oneself up by one’s bootstraps,” even though studies show that one’s adult social class is largely determined by the social class into which one was born.
2. **The lack of feudalism and socialist movement.** America’s lack of **feudalism**, a system for structuring society around relationships derived from the holding of land in exchange for service or labor, bolstered this individualism because it freed individuals from psychologically connecting one’s future to the collective viewpoint of a particular class.⁴ Feudalism, which existed during the Middle Ages in Europe, meant that peasants, or lower-class people, worked the land for an overlord. In the old world, feudalism created significant class divisions and consciousness in all areas of economic, social, and political life and ultimately led to the **socialist movement**—a movement based upon workers’ rights and social ownership of the means of production.
3. **Constitutional stability and rigidity.** The government of the United States created by the Constitutional Convention in 1787 was a bold experiment. At the point of the writing of the Constitution, no government existed anywhere in the world like the United States. What is particularly remarkable about American democracy is the staying

power of its Constitution (discussed more in Chapter 5). Over time, more democracies came on board across the world and crafted new institutions that fit the spirit of those times. Those evolved institutions were not adopted by the United States. The relative rigidity of the stable U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights reinforced principles of the social contract and limited government while democratic principles and institutions kept evolving in other democracies.

Here, the United States is clearly the “exception”—Americans had no demands for socialism. In other countries, a new urban working class developed a class consciousness born of frustration with an often cruel industrializing society with dangerous working conditions, child labor, squalor, and no real social, economic, or political power. Indeed, English novelist Charles Dickens’s view of London may be as insightful as German philosopher Karl Marx’s (see Box 3.3) for why the lower classes were broadly ripe for revolt in these countries. The bitter economic, social, and political inequalities led this class to embrace the socialist movement’s promise of social and economic equality, and very importantly, the political power of the right to vote. As political scientist Louis Hartz argued, “actually socialism is largely an ideological phenomenon, arising out of the principles of class and the revolutionary liberal revolt against them which the old European order inspired.”³⁵ Changing the social, political, and economic order for the benefit of the working-class masses drove the socialist movement in Europe. The only way to improve one’s political, social, and economic lot was to bind arms with one’s fellow workers and class members to gain the right to vote and political power, which would in turn lead to government owning or regulating the marketplace for better economic equality, provision of decent public housing, and assurance of a more equal social order. Thus, gains were to be made through collective rather than individual struggle.

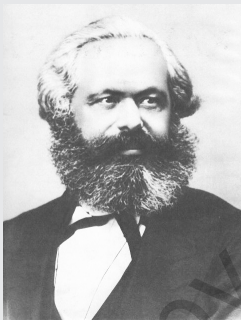
Even though the same harsh working conditions faced the American working class, the socialist movement never gained a foothold in the United States because it was not attractive to working-class Americans. First, the social order of these European societies had already been rejected by Americans when they fled feudalism. Second, most working white men already had the right to vote so the political appeal of the right to vote did not attract the American working class. Third, despite sharing similar urban working-class life conditions with Europeans, the American working class, as Hartz argued, had the availability of land, and American natural “abundance” meant that workers had economic options. The European working class could not “go west” to homestead or prospect natural resources because land ownership had already been exhausted. Therefore, improving one’s life in the United States was not solved by joining together with fellow workers; it meant striking out on one’s own. Thus, *Americans’ economic and political welfare was an individually determined good rather than collectively achievable.*

These exceptional conditions at the American founding through the Industrial Revolution in the nineteenth century put the United States on a different democratic path from other democracies. These conditions and founding

principles were reinforced by the stability and rigidity of the U.S. Constitution, which kept Americans on this path by protecting civil liberties over the common good when they conflicted at key points in history. Other democracies forged a different path, influenced by the socialist movement and constitutions that protected principles of the common good. Understanding why contemporary democracy differs between the United States and others requires as much concentration on America's distinctive democratic path as on any current institutional, policy, or rhetorical dissimilarities with other democracies. The starting point on this path led the United States toward a much more liberal democracy, while most other democracies ended up as social democracies due to differing starting points on their trails of democracy.

BOX 3.3

U.S. and Europe in the 1800s



► **Photo 3.4** Karl Marx
by Friedrich Karl Wunder,
accessed via www.marxists.org.

When Karl Marx wrote “Workers of the World, Unite!” for economic and political power, most Americans were not buying the argument because a greater extent of economic and political power was already possible in the United States without uniting. Just how different were Americans and Europeans at this time? In 1848, the working class revolted throughout European countries for economic and political power. Similar squalid conditions existed for the working class in American cities, but rather than linking together with fellow members of the working class, many American workers gave up everything to bolt westward to seek the riches of the gold rush just a year later in 1849. French writer Victor Hugo captured the mood of collective European nineteenth century class heroism and death in the novel *Les Misérables*. Meanwhile, Americans were reading about heroic figures such as an individually resourceful Natty Bumppo in James Fenimore Cooper’s *Leatherstocking Tales* or Horatio Alger stories about a farm boy who becomes a senator.

SOCIAL DEMOCRACY AND LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

Liberal democracy is a political system built around a belief in representative and limited government, regular and competitive elections, the rule of law, multiple channels for political participation, limited state control over the economy, and

the protection of civil rights and liberties. Americans tend to use the terms *liberal* and *liberalism* differently from others around the world, focusing on the ideological meaning of liberalism rather than more often used classical or economic meanings. In order to understand the meaning of liberal, it is important to remember that the words *liberal* and *liberty* come from the same Latin base, *liber*, meaning free. Many of you take liberal arts courses because a well-rounded education makes one a free and superior citizen, unable to be duped by myth, fooled by faulty logic of governing authority, or shackled by ignorance. An important source of academic freedom and citizen power comes from libraries—which also share the same root. In other words, liberalism focuses on the notion of individual freedom and extends ideas of freedom to the economic marketplace and political power. Therefore, liberal democracy incorporates elements of classical and economic liberalism and is not to be confused with American ideological liberalism (see Table 3.1). Liberalism ideologically in other democracies more closely fits the foundations of classical and economic liberalism.

Liberal democracy can be contrasted with social democracy. **Social democracy** also recognizes the primacy of freedoms and liberty. We saw this in the discussion of the similarities between all advanced industrial democracies in Chapter 2, but social democracy places much greater emphasis on the social welfare responsibilities of governments. Borrowing more from ideas of Rousseau than Locke, economic equality and political equality are both seen as equally important in social democracies, and economic redistribution policies are often embraced as a way to add fairness and justice to the system. Not to be confused at all with **socialism**—an economic system where the state rather than the market determines production, distribution, and pricing and where property is government

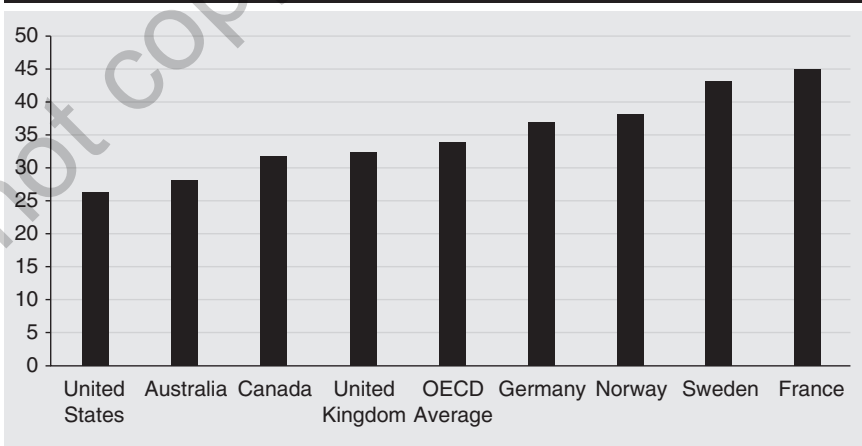
Table 3.1 Meanings of Liberalism

| | |
|--|--|
| American Ideological Liberalism | Approach to society based on greater government involvement in people's lives as a way of redistributing wealth, equalizing opportunity, and righting social wrongs. |
| Classical Liberalism | Approach to government based on limiting government power through a social contract (constitution) and respecting personal freedoms and the rights of individuals. |
| Economic Liberalism | Belief in private property including a hands-off (laissez-faire) approach to the economy and promotion of a free market driven by supply and demand. |

owned—social democracy advocates greater regulation of the marketplace for the common good and greater regulation of democratic decision making to meet the general will than does liberal democracy. That said, as a governing and economic system, it is far closer to liberal democracy than socialism.

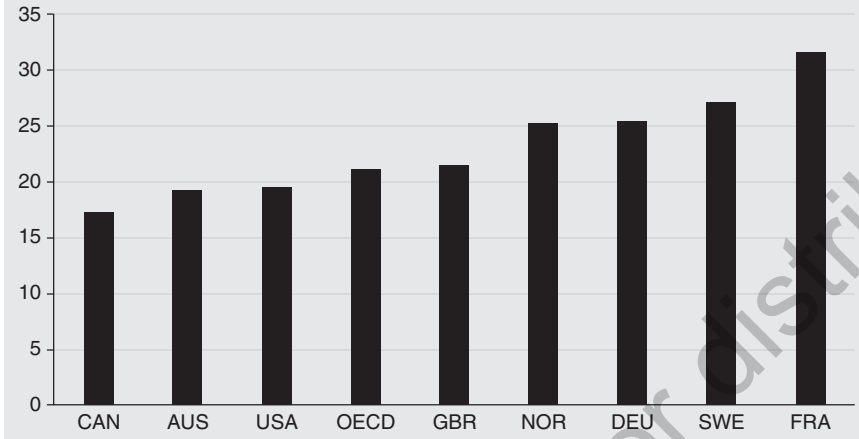
While the United States follows more of a liberal democratic model, many European democracies, especially in Nordic countries, follow a social democratic model. Both liberal and social democracies are welfare states. A **welfare state** is one where the government plays a key role in providing a “safety net” and passes policies aimed at protecting and promoting the economic and social well-being of its citizens. The United States, like all other social and liberal democracies, is a welfare state. Its welfare system is just more constrained than the welfare systems in social democracies, meaning that it prefers to leave some social welfare items, like health care or higher education, to private entities or market forces. In social democracies, we generally see a more expansive welfare state with government-run healthcare systems, subsidized education, and broader social welfare systems. In these systems, there is far greater tax responsibilities and redistribution of wealth for social welfare policies. As OECD (developed countries) data in Figure 3.1 demonstrate, the percentage of a country’s total economy that is taxed in social democracies far exceeds—and sometimes nearly doubles—the same rate for the United States. In some cases nearly half of the economic production (gross domestic product) is taxed. Further, Figure 3.2 provides the other side of the coin: what are governments doing with that taxed income? The same social democracies that tax at high percentages redistribute that tax revenue through social programs.

Figure 3.1 Total Tax Revenue as a Percentage of GDP, Select Countries



Source: OECD 2015, <https://data.oecd.org/tax/tax-revenue.htm>

Figure 3.2 Total Public Social Spending as a Percentage of GDP, Select Countries



Source: OECD (2018), Social spending (indicator). doi: 10.1787/7497563b-en (Accessed on March 19, 2018)

This raises another point. We are often comparing apples and oranges when one tries to explain government spending when the *size of countries' economies differ*. To understand this, think about financial aid. Can we compare a family budget using percentages if one family makes \$30,000 per year and one makes \$500,000? Does it mean the same thing for each family to spend 10 percent of their income on education? Will it equally affect each family's ability to buy groceries or maintain a basic standard of living? The same applies when comparing government spending when the size of economies differs, highlighting a further component of how remarkable the United States is on taxation and social spending. The United States is the largest economy in the world and could tax more than other countries and still meet obligations of modern states, and it could spend more on social welfare than other countries with spare room for other policy needs given its economic power. But it doesn't. In fact, it taxes and spends far less relative to other much smaller-sized economies. It does so out of public preference and because of views surrounding legitimate governing policy choices. Social democracies tax their citizenry as well and provide public services at a much higher rate than the United States, especially given the size of their economies. There are not protests in the streets of these social democracies based on government taxation and social spending levels. Indeed, it is often when the broad social welfare programs get curtailed that people hit the streets.

An important point to remember is that no democracy is completely liberal or social, and all of these advanced industrial democracies share competitive democracy, free markets, and other core democratic freedoms. These democracies can be found along a continuum from those that embrace more social democratic models—where

government is seen to be legitimate when it provides for a stronger social welfare state for the collective benefit—to those that embrace more liberal democratic models—where limited government is the benchmark of legitimacy (see Figure 3.3).

How central is social welfare to governmental legitimacy in these social democracies? In social democracies, we see that social rights are enshrined in constitutions. In fact, every European constitution contains social rights (called positive rights). For example, Section 15 of the Finnish constitution states that “public authorities shall, in the manner stipulated in greater detail by Act of Parliament, secure for everyone adequate social welfare and health services and shall promote the health of the population.”⁶ In other words, the Finnish government is legitimate in so far as it provides for the social welfare of the country, including healthcare. The German Basic Law (constitution) also codifies social rights. Article 20 of the Basic Law explicitly states that Germany is a *social* federal state. Rights found in the federal and state constitutions in Germany include rights to housing, employment, and social security. The South African constitution goes further than any other constitution in the guarantee of social rights, and it has in fact been looked to as a model by countries drafting new constitutions.⁷ The South African constitution explicitly guarantees the right to food, water, housing, health care, and social security. In addition, South Africa permits individuals to petition the Constitutional Court on the grounds their social rights have been violated. Thus, while the United States’ Constitution limits government and focuses on the rights upon which the government cannot tread, or those things the government *cannot* do, constitutions in social democracies codify the social responsibilities of government and specify what government *must* do. This is an idea we revisit in Chapter 5.

Whether or not a country is more liberal or social in its approach to democracy has policy implications, particularly as related to the cost and provision of **public goods** and services (see Box 3.4 for an example), those goods and services provided by government as opposed to private enterprise. Even when these **social goods** are not constitutionally guaranteed, social democracies provide a strong safety net for citizens and more publicly funded social services than liberal democracies. Social services can range from universal health care, to retirement benefits, to state-funded day cares. Social democracies provide these services publicly more so than liberal democracies. One area of social service, parental leave, provides an interesting example. The United States is the only advanced industrial democracy

Figure 3.3 Continuum of Liberal to Social Democracy



BOX 3.4

The Cost of College Education

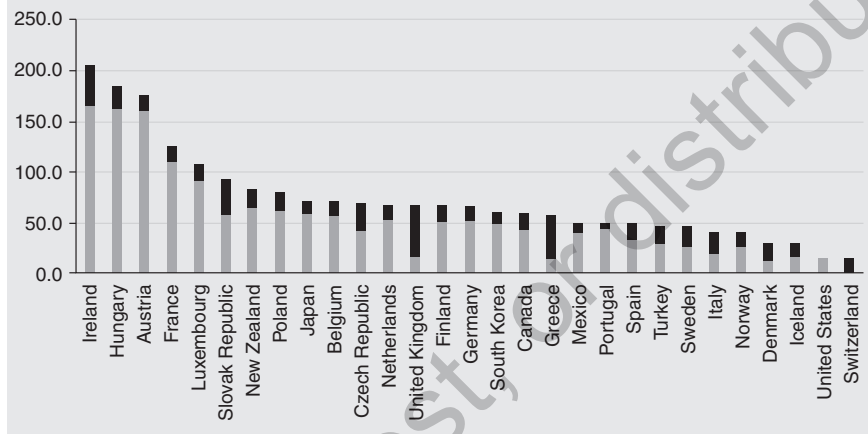
In social democracies, the cost of many social goods, a good or service that benefits the largest number of people in the largest possible way, are subsidized by the taxpayer. For example, in France, if you are sick, you can go to the doctor and be treated without any out-of-pocket expense. You do not have to have insurance because insurance is public, or provided through the government. Another social good is college education. While in the United States the cost of college education is subsidized through grants and loans that the graduate then needs to repay, in many social democracies of Europe, the cost of college education is lower in the first place because the cost is covered by the taxpayer. For example, the average cost of yearly tuition for a four-year degree in the United States in 2013 was \$13,856, an 1120 percent increase since 1978. In 2017, the average cost was just over \$20,000. In Germany, by comparison, it was \$933 in 2013. Germany abolished tuition in 2014, and today students pay fees of about \$500 per term. In the table below, we see the average cost of college education as of 2017. Note, we break out private and public for the United States, but other countries include the average of all types of institutions. Even compared with the Commonwealth countries—Canada, United Kingdom, and Australia—that have higher levels of tuition compared to mainland Europe, the U.S. costs are considerably higher. Additionally, U.S. students are graduating with significantly more debt than students in other countries. This is because even in places where tuition is similar to that of the United States, the number of students who qualify for subsidization of their tuition is higher. Thus, on average, U.S. students graduate with \$37,000 in debt, while in the U.K., on average, they graduate with \$30,000 in debt and in Germany \$2,400 in debt.⁸

| Country | Education Costs |
|----------------|--|
| Germany | Free |
| France | <\$1,000 |
| Sweden | Free |
| Finland | Free |
| Netherlands | Approx. \$2,500 |
| United Kingdom | Approx. \$8,000 |
| Australia | Approx. \$5,000 |
| Canada | Approx. \$5,000 |
| United States | \$8,700 (public 4 year); \$21,000 (private 4 year) |

Source: Student Loan Review, The Cost of College Education around the World, <https://www.studentloanreview.com/college-cost-around-the-world-infographic>.

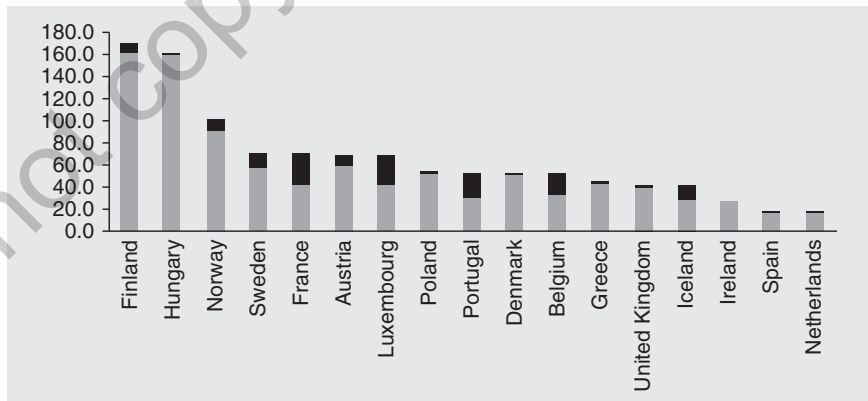
to not mandate paid parental leave (either maternity or paternity), although a parent can take up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave under the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA). Other advanced industrial democracies mandate paid leave (see Figures 3.4 and 3.5), including maternal leave (for mothers) and paternal

Figure 3.4 Maternal Leave: Weeks Entitlement vs. Weeks Paid, 2016



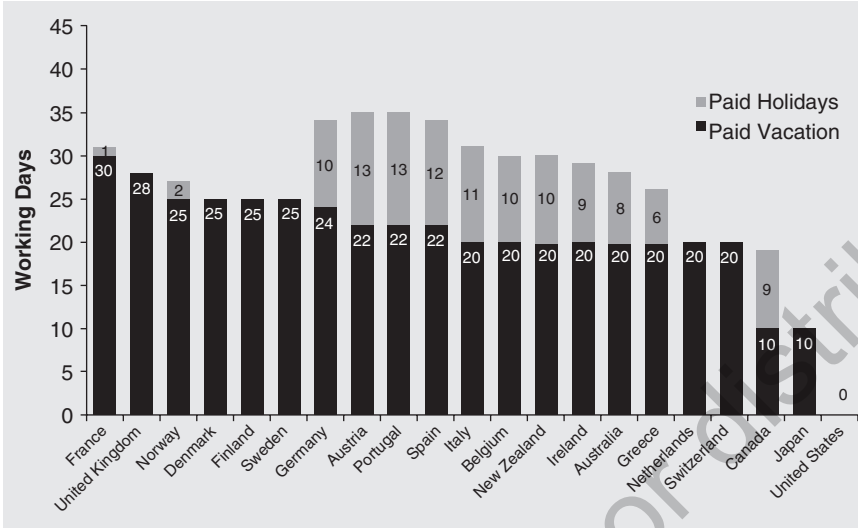
Source: OECD, OECD Family Database, <http://www.oecd.org/els/family/database.htm>. The light gray represents paid leave, the dark gray represents number of weeks of leave to which a mother is entitled.

Figure 3.5 Paternal Leave: Weeks Entitlement vs. Weeks Paid, 2016



Source: OECD, OECD Family Database, <http://www.oecd.org/els/family/database.htm>. The light gray represents paid leave, the dark gray represents the number of weeks of leave to which a father is entitled. The United States is not on the chart because it does not guarantee paternal leave.

Figure 3.6 Paid Vacation and Holidays



Source: OECD (2010), *Society at a Glance 2010: OECD Social Indicators*, OECD Publishing, http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/soc_glance-2008-en.

leave (for fathers). This means that it is *required that companies give, and workers take, parental leave*.

In social democracies, we also see states supporting paid vacation. In this regard, the United States is very different from other democracies. The United States is the only advanced industrial democracy that does not support paid vacation as mandated by federal law (see Figure 3.6), although locally variations may exist based on state law or local statutes.

CONCLUSION

This chapter focused on American exceptionalism, or the uniqueness of the United States, explaining that this difference can be understood by looking at the unique historical conditions at the time of the country's founding. Lockean ideas of legitimacy defined American democracy from its founding, and the lack of feudalism, a propensity for risk taking, and natural abundance helped lead to an American system that is different from other advanced industrial democracies. This uniqueness is manifested in the fact that the United States has a more liberal form of democracy that is much longer standing than other democracies, while other democracies are more social in their democratic orientation. In turn, this influences tax and social policies, with the United States having lower taxes, less social spending, and fewer guaranteed social rights than other advanced industrial

democracies. As we will see in the following chapters, this difference combined with different political culture (discussed in Chapter 4) leads to differences in institutions and interest articulation through interest groups and political parties (discussed in Chapters 6, 7, 8, and 9) and electoral institutions and behavior (discussed in Chapters 10 and 11).

POINTS TO REMEMBER

- American exceptionalism refers to the idea that the United States is an exception, or different, from other democracies.
- A key difference between the United States and other democracies stems from a philosophical view of legitimate government and the balance it draws between individual citizen liberties and collective will.
- The founding conditions in the United States compared to other countries differed. Those conditions and subsequent political life have predisposed Americans to view what makes government legitimate, or popularly accepted, differently from citizens of other advanced industrial democracies.
- American government borrows from ideas of Locke that limited government is best and that government is legitimate when it protects life, liberty, and property (the pursuit of happiness). This differs from other ideas of social contract, based upon collective good.
- The United States is a liberal democracy. Liberal democracies combine classical and economic ideas of liberalism.
- Liberal democracy can be contrasted with social democracy. Liberal democracies focus more on limited government and protection of individual rights, and social democracies focus on the protection of social rights and expansive welfare states, or social safety nets.
- Social democracies tend to have higher levels of taxation but also higher levels of social spending and provision of social services.

KEY TERMS

| | | |
|----------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------|
| American exceptionalism 32 | Feudalism 37 | Social contract 33 |
| Americanists 31 | Laissez-faire 40 | Social democracy 40 |
| Associational life 33 | Legitimate 32 | Social goods 43 |
| Common good 36 | Legitimate government 33 | Socialism 40 |
| Comparativists 31 | Liberal democracy 39 | Socialist movement 37 |
| Divine Right of Kings 33 | Path-dependent explanations 37 | State of Nature 33 |
| Enlightenment Era 33 | Public goods 43 | Tyranny of the majority 35 |
| | | Welfare state 41 |

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is the key distinction between what comparativists and Americanists study?
2. What do we mean when we refer to American exceptionalism?
3. Describe the historical conditions that differed at the founding of the U.S. democracy as compared to European democracies. How do these founding differences help to explain differences in American government today?
4. In what way is American democracy influenced by the thinking of social contract theorist John Locke? How does this differ from the thinking of Rousseau?
5. How does a liberal democracy differ from a social democracy? What are some policy implications of this difference?

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NOTES

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5. Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America*, 6.
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