

One Nation, Divisible

Living in red and blue states, I was always struck by how stars and stripes appear on nearly every corner in “the land of the free.” By the same token, “The Star-Spangled Banner” is sung before virtually each sporting event, and schoolchildren are commonly expected to pledge allegiance to the flag. From Texas to New York, Chicago, and the Bay Area, legions of Americans follow such rituals calling on people to worship their country. If the rituals’ meaning must sometimes be inferred, the nation’s leaders are usually more straightforward. Both Democratic and Republican politicians regularly proclaim that America is the greatest country in history and a nation picked by God to enlighten the world.

In most other democracies, flags hang mainly on government buildings. People rarely wave them, except on national holidays or when a national team competes in a major event like the World Cup or Olympics. Anthems are also generally reserved for national holidays or competitions involving national teams, not ordinary sporting events between high schools, universities, or professional clubs. While the majority of Americans take ubiquitous flag waving and anthem singing for granted, the Pledge of Allegiance has become fairly controversial, although that is largely because it refers to America as a “nation under God,” a concern for secularists. The very idea of urging children to pledge allegiance has not proved remotely as divisive.

National chauvinism has evolved into a religion in America, where around 80 percent of the public agrees that “the U.S. has a unique character that makes it the greatest country in the world.”¹ Americans are typically convinced that their nation’s superiority was bestowed by the Almighty, as 62 percent deem that “God has granted America a special role in human history.”²

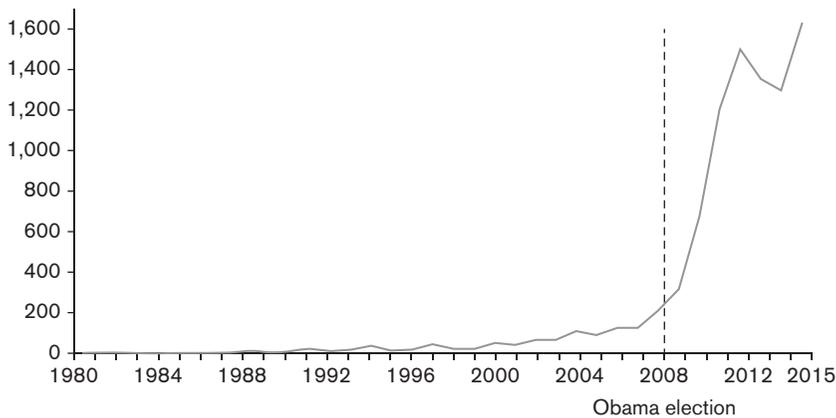


FIGURE 2. Mentions of “American exceptionalism” in U.S. media, 1980–2015. SOURCE: Westlaw.

Faith in the inherent greatness of the United States is often described as “American exceptionalism.” Figure 2 shows how references to “American exceptionalism” skyrocketed in the media after Barack Obama entered the White House in 2009,³ as Republican leaders constantly invoked the phrase to impugn his patriotism. From Mitt Romney to John Boehner, Jeb Bush, Marco Rubio, Ted Cruz, and Donald Trump, the G.O.P. brass insisted that Obama does not believe in “American exceptionalism” and aimed to turn the United States into “socialist” Europe or, at best, Canada. Yet it was not simply Obama’s policies that were allegedly un-American. The Republicans’ focus on defending “American exceptionalism” paralleled an explosion of conspiracy theories claiming that Obama was secretly born in Kenya, lacks a valid U.S. birth certificate, and is a covert Muslim with jihadist sympathies.

However, American exceptionalism does not necessarily mean what most people think. As the phrase became a recurrent talking point during the Obama presidency, few people paused to consider its original definition. Until being hijacked by politicians in recent years, the concept of American exceptionalism was primarily used by academics to identify America as an *exception* compared to other countries, especially Western nations. A more capitalistic economy lacking universal health care, more punitive penal system coexisting with lax gun control, and more unilateral foreign policy are among the aspects of American exceptionalism that academics have explored.

While many Americans equate “exceptionalism” with their country’s inherent superiority, certain dimensions of American exceptionalism may contribute to its decline. One of them is the worsening division of American

society under the presidencies of George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump. Conservative and liberal Americans have grown further and further apart in their worldviews, values, and factual understandings.

Both the polarization of American society and American exceptionalism have received extensive media coverage for nearly a decade. But journalists and academics have largely overlooked the interrelationship between these two major issues by analyzing them separately. The intense polarization of American society is actually a key dimension of American exceptionalism. In no other Western nation are people so divided over fundamental questions about the role of government, access to health care, wealth inequality, financial regulation, climate change, science, sexual propriety, reproductive rights, the literal truth of the Bible, warfare, and human rights. This acute polarization has led to a gridlock with profound consequences for American society and the world.

THE STORIED LIFE OF AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

“For a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.” Drawn from the conclusion of *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s stirring homage to America echoes longstanding ideas about the “New World.”

The Europeans who colonized North America were persuaded that they had settled a unique world. America was not simply a remote continent with exotic sceneries and “strange” Indian “heathens.” Many Europeans perceived America as a land with a special destiny awaiting the arrival of its rightful owners, who would mold it into an ideal society.⁴

The Founding Fathers shared this conviction. “America was designed by Providence for the Theatre, on which Man was to make his true figure, on which science, Virtue, Liberty, Happiness and Glory were to exist in Peace,” John Adams wrote.⁵ Once thirteen colonies defying the British Empire, the United States became a continent-size country as following generations settled westward and thwarted rival claims to territory by Indian tribes and the British, French, Spanish, and Mexicans. “Manifest Destiny,” a phrase coined in 1845, refers to the United States’ expansion across North America in the name of progress and liberty. As the historian Anders Stephanson explained,

“Manifest Destiny” evoked “God’s chosen people in the Promised Land” in a “reenactment of the Exodus narrative.” The faithful widely thought that the United States’ creation and growth fulfilled biblical prophecies. While certain citizens called into question expansionism and the violence it could entail, the notion that America is a special country pursuing a divinely chosen path had not merely been ingrained by then. It was also already a way of justifying political actions, however inspiring or troubling they might be.⁶

America the Exception

To countless people nowadays, “American exceptionalism” evokes an inherent superiority hallowed by God—the same sentiment shared by colonists convinced that their takeover of Indian land was God’s plan, Founding Fathers confident that Providence was on their side, and later generations trusting in America’s Manifest Destiny.

Yet the initial description of America as an “exceptional” country has mostly been traced to a foreigner who did not use the term in this sense, namely Alexis de Tocqueville. The nineteenth-century Frenchman’s epic journey through America led him to describe it as uniquely different from Europe. “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,” he wrote in one of his many observations.⁷ Tocqueville is frequently remembered as an admirer of the United States. He indeed praised Americans for their trailblazing democratic institutions, sense of civic duty, industriousness, and spirit of innovation. Nevertheless, he criticized Americans on other grounds, including their common support for slavery, mistreatment of Indians, and materialism. When describing America as an “exceptional” country, Tocqueville meant that it is an exception—a singular nation, not an inherently superior one.

Tocqueville apparently never used the precise phrase “American exceptionalism,” and scholars have ironically attributed its coinage to communists critical of America. Jay Lovestone, the leader of the U.S. Communist Party, used the phrase in the 1920s to argue that communism would evolve differently in the United States than elsewhere because of the country’s special conditions, a thesis he called “American exceptionalism.” Lovestone’s view drew the ire of none other than Joseph Stalin, who condemned it as heresy deviating from Marxism’s universal laws. After a tense meeting in Moscow, the Soviet dictator threatened Lovestone and had him detained until he

narrowly escaped with the help of a Latvian contact. Lovestone was subsequently expelled from the Communist Party.⁸

By the 1950s, “American exceptionalism” was mainly a descriptive concept used by academics to refer to the social traits that make America an exception compared to other countries.⁹ As American exceptionalism developed into a significant topic of research in history, politics, law, sociology, economics, and other fields, academics advanced diverse theories about what makes America unique and whether such features are positive or not.¹⁰ For instance, the absence of universal health care in America may be admirable or problematic, depending on one’s values. The same thing can be said about its retention of the death penalty, its immense military budget, and beyond.

In sum, “exceptionalism” has not historically meant “greatness.” Two decades ago, the social scientist Seymour Martin Lipset already expressed concern about this misconception: “When Tocqueville or other ‘foreign traveler’ writers or social scientists have used the term ‘exceptional’ to describe the United States, they have not meant, as some critics of the concept assume, that America is better than other countries or has a superior culture. Rather, they have simply been suggesting that it is qualitatively different, that it is an outlier.”¹¹

However, the distortion of the concept reached unprecedented levels during the Obama years, as Republican politicians recurrently blasted him for repudiating “American exceptionalism.” The media and rank-and-file citizens thus also came to readily conflate “American exceptionalism” with a conviction in American superiority. Even prominent journalists like Glenn Greenwald, who disclosed classified National Security Agency files handed to him by Edward Snowden, have overlooked the phrase’s original meaning. Greenwald therefore denounced “belief in objective U.S. superiority, this myth of American exceptionalism,” thereby accepting the redefinition of the concept by the G.O.P.¹²

An Anti-Obama Slogan and Dog Whistle

Expressing faith in America’s superiority has long been a theme of U.S. politics. God made America “a shining city upon a hill,” Ronald Reagan famously said, combining words from the Puritan colonist John Winthrop and the lyrics of “America the Beautiful.”¹³ While politicians of all stripes have proclaimed similar ideas throughout history, Figure 2 demonstrates that Republicans did not systematically use the expression “American exceptionalism” until Obama was elected.

At the 2015 Conservative Political Action Conference—a major stop for prospective presidential candidates—the Fox News pundit Sean Hannity asked Jeb Bush his thoughts on exceptionalism. “I do believe in American exceptionalism,” Bush responded, unlike Obama, who “is disrespecting our history and the extraordinary nature of our country.” The third scion of the Bush family aiming to be president added that the post-Obama era must begin with “restoring a love of our country.”

Rudolph Giuliani, New York’s ex-mayor, was more explicit. “I do not believe that the president loves America,” he asserted, as Obama does not think “we’re the most exceptional country in the world.” Giuliani’s tirade came in a speech encouraging Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker to run for president. Asked if he agreed that Obama does not love America, Walker answered: “I don’t really know what his opinions are on that one way or another.”

Ted Cruz later declared his candidacy in a speech emphasizing that “American exceptionalism” has made the United States “a clarion voice for freedom in the world, a shining city on a hill”—a promise Obama had purportedly betrayed. Marco Rubio followed suit by saying he would run for president “because I believe our very identity as an exceptional nation is at stake.” Donald Trump concurred, underlining that “maybe my biggest beef with Obama is his view that there’s nothing special or exceptional in America—that we’re no different than any other country” and that “America would be better off if we acted more like European socialist countries.”¹⁴

The 2012 Republican presidential candidates sang the same tune. Mitt Romney insisted that, unlike Obama, he believes in “American exceptionalism,” by which he meant that America is “the greatest nation in the history of the world and a force for good.” According to Romney, Obama “thinks America’s just another nation” and wants it to become “a European-style entitlement society.” John Sununu, the cochair of Romney’s campaign, added that Obama should “learn how to be an American.” Rick Santorum agreed that Obama “doesn’t believe America is exceptional” and aimed to “impose some sort of European socialism.” Newt Gingrich published a campaign book, *A Nation like No Other: Why American Exceptionalism Matters*, making the same points.

The evolution of the Republican platform is also striking. From 1856 to 2008, the party’s official platforms never used the expression “American exceptionalism” or even the adjective “exceptional” to describe the country.¹⁵ By contrast, the final section of the 2012 Republican platform, lambasting the Obama presidency, was titled “American Exceptionalism.”¹⁶ The 2016

platform was more straightforward. The first line of its preamble stressed: “We believe in American exceptionalism.”¹⁷

In practice, protecting the country’s “exceptional” character meant embracing the G.O.P. program of massive tax cuts, sweeping deregulation, and religious ultratraditionalism. “American exceptionalism is the product of unlimited freedom,” Texas Governor Rick Perry argued. “And there is nothing troubling our nation today that cannot be solved by the rebirth of freedom.” The redefinition of “American exceptionalism” as freedom from “big government” and “Euro-style socialism” especially galvanized Tea Party supporters.

Obama had supposedly abandoned “American exceptionalism” by implementing stimulus measures and improving financial regulation following the gravest economic and financial crises since the Great Depression. Worse, he had profoundly threatened the liberty of the American people with a radical socialist takeover of everyone’s health care—by passing a moderate reform derived from Republican plans that were once considered market friendly and limited in scope. Few Americans are aware that the policy misleadingly labeled “Obamacare” was advanced by Richard Nixon and the Heritage Foundation before being instituted in Massachusetts by Romney when he was its governor.¹⁸ Republican leaders set these facts aside as part of a strategy depicting Obama as a dangerous radical. Around 41 percent of Republican citizens were indeed persuaded that Obama “wants to use an economic collapse or terrorist attack as an excuse to take dictatorial powers.”¹⁹

Instead of trumpeting U.S. superiority, Obama was allegedly busy “apologizing” to the world because of his uneasiness with America’s superpower status. Taking umbrage at Obama’s “apology tour,” Romney argued that America is a quasi-perfect country. “I will never, ever apologize for America,” he insisted. But this frequent Republican talking point was a straw man. Obama had never “apologized” for America.²⁰ Rather, he had struck a conciliatory tone with the international community and the Muslim world in the aftermath of George W. Bush’s widely unpopular foreign policy. The Bush administration’s unilateralism, invasion of Iraq, approval of torture, attempt to detain any terrorism suspect forever without trial at Guantánamo, and other human rights abuses had greatly tarnished America’s international reputation, hindering its capacity to lead by example.*

* We will see in Chapter 8 that the Obama administration eventually institutionalized certain controversial Bush-era counterterrorism policies.

Above all, the Republicans' focus on "American exceptionalism" was premised on the idea that Obama denied America's specialness. In fact, he had long proclaimed that Americans are a unique people, such as by affirming that America is "a light to the world" and "the greatest nation on Earth." But the G.O.P. shed doubt on Obama's conviction by exploiting his nuanced language. When Obama was asked his opinion on American exceptionalism, he responded: "I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism." He then added that America has a special culture and plays an "extraordinary role in leading the world." Various pundits quoted solely the first part of the answer as proof of his lack of patriotism.²¹ Much of the Republican base was even persuaded that Obama is not really American but rather a covert Muslim with a forged U.S. birth certificate.²²

Paradoxically, Trump criticized establishment Republicans for talking about "American exceptionalism," describing it as national chauvinism,²³ although he ran an ultranationalistic campaign and himself accused Obama of not believing that America is "exceptional."²⁴ This epitomized Trump's tendency to systematically take self-contradictory positions throughout his campaign. Hillary Clinton reacted by denouncing Trump for not believing in "American exceptionalism,"²⁵ mirroring the Republicans' attacks on Obama, who likewise tried to co-opt the phrase. "My entire career has been a testimony to American exceptionalism," Obama previously emphasized.

Naturally, the meaning of words can change over time. But the conflation of "American exceptionalism" with "American superiority" during Obama's presidency did not occur through a natural process of linguistic evolution. It was a political strategy that led American exceptionalism to become a major topic following the election of the first black president, a man with a foreign-sounding name. For decades, mainstream politicians have used dog whistles—coded racial rhetoric—to stir hostility against minorities. The evolution of "American exceptionalism" into an anti-Obama rallying cry with nativist overtones evoked Republican leaders' appeals to "states' rights" to rouse whites resenting the end of segregation.²⁶

While Trump mostly abandoned dog whistles for an overtly nativist campaign, his slogan "Make America Great Again" echoed the Republican establishment's calls to restore the golden age of "American exceptionalism," whose ideals Obama had betrayed. Trump's conspiracy-mongering about Obama's birthplace and Islamism also expanded on the Republican establishment's repeated assertions about Obama's un-American values. These

were not the only ways that the Republican establishment provided fertile ground for Trumpism.

AN EXCEPTIONALLY POLARIZED NATION

Why did Obama's presidency prove so divisive? This question relates to the original meaning of exceptionalism—America is an *exception* within the Western world partly because its conservatives and liberals are far more divided than other Westerners over their core values. Problems that have long been essentially resolved in almost all other Western nations, such as health care and abortion, are therefore explosive issues in America. Social divisions have always existed in America, but partisan polarization has surged in recent decades, as Figure 3 shows, making the country quasi-ungovernable at times.

In 2004, Obama famously declared that “there is not a liberal America and a conservative America—there is the United States of America.” In reality, that assertion was less a fact than an aspiration, wishful thinking, or a political strategy based on a theme of unity. The dominant worldview in liberal America is not only vastly different from the one in conservative America. It is also often closer to the dominant worldview elsewhere in the Western world: Europe, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.

Living in Different Worlds

Pundits routinely identify partisan gerrymandering as a leading cause of polarization,²⁷ although the evidence for this claim appears thin.²⁸ Blaming polarization largely on Republican-led gerrymandering suggests that it is an artificial situation caused by political gamesmanship. This account minimizes the genuinely different worldviews separating modern American conservatives and liberals.

Obama hoped to unify the nation and practically usher in a postpartisan age following the clashes of the Bush presidency. The precise opposite occurred. Since the post-Civil War Reconstruction era, Congress was never as polarized as during the Obama presidency, according to a sophisticated statistical study.²⁹ Irreconcilable views about the purpose of government have kept Democratic and Republican leaders from finding common ground on nearly every single issue. A crippling shutdown of the federal government ensued in 2013, which again set America apart from other Western nations, whose



FIGURE 3. Party polarization in Congress, 1879–2015, based on roll call voting records. SOURCE: Nolan McCarty, Keith Poole, and Howard Rosenthal (MIT Press; voteview.com).

governments face virtually no risk of shutdown.³⁰ In 2016, after Justice Antonin Scalia died, Republican senators categorically refused to consider any replacement that Obama might propose for the Supreme Court. Like federal institutions, “state legislatures are becoming significantly more polarized.”³¹

While Obama was reelected with a wide margin of Electoral College votes, 332 to 206, he won barely 51 percent of the popular vote. His contest against Romney was tighter than it seemed and featured two very distinct conceptions of what America should be. Obama’s reelection utterly dismayed the millions of conservatives who identified him as a dangerous “socialist” bent on America’s economic and moral decline. This situation was reminiscent of George W. Bush’s reelection in 2004, which deeply appalled most liberals.

The gulf between conservative and liberal America worsened in the 2016 campaign, given the starkly different values defended by Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, if not Ted Cruz or Paul Ryan. Clinton won the popular vote by approximately three million ballots.³² Trump won the Electoral College comfortably, 304–227 votes, notwithstanding his endless stream of extremist, megalomaniac, racist, sexist, vulgar, and baseless statements. “I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody and I wouldn’t lose any voters,” Trump boasted in early 2016. A few weeks later he tweeted a quote from Benito Mussolini—whose Fascist regime fought against America in World War II—insisting that it was “a very good quote” and “I know who

said it.”³³ He also repeatedly praised Vladimir Putin, the Russian dictator. In the run-up to the vote, Trump alleged that it would be “rigged” and suggested that he might not accept the democratic process: “I will totally accept the results—if I win.” Even though he is not a traditional fascist in Mussolini’s mold, his campaign had neofascist dimensions. Robert Paxton, an expert on the history of fascism, observed that “Trump shows a rather alarming willingness to use fascist themes and fascist styles.”³⁴ But Paxton and several other experts described Trump as more of a far-right populist.³⁵

It may come as no surprise that the divide is partly regional. Republicans from the most conservative regions of the country, the South and Midwest, are generally more conservative than Republicans from the most liberal regions, the Northeast and West Coast. By the same token, Democrats from liberal regions are more liberal than Democrats from conservative regions. What people usually overlook, however, is that the intensity of America’s regional divide is exceptional. There are obviously rather liberal and conservative regions in other Western nations, but their citizens are not sharply divided over such basic issues as whether people should have a right to medical treatment.

Besides, the extraordinary polarization of American society is not merely between blue and red states, as a major partisan rift has occurred nationwide. Republican leaders in blue states typically join their counterparts in red states in defending hardline positions on essentially all issues. It is revealing that the New Yorker Trump proved popular not only among Southern or Midwestern conservatives. Rudolph Giuliani and Chris Christie, who respectively served as the mayor of New York and the governor of New Jersey, vehemently supported his extremist campaign.

Of course, Trump feuded with establishment Republicans, some of whom found the specter of his presidency fearful. The party’s two prior presidential candidates notably urged voters to reject him. Mitt Romney labeled Trump a dangerous “phony.” Yet he had gladly welcomed Trump’s endorsement in his 2012 campaign—regardless of how Trump spouted bigoted conspiracy theories about Obama’s forged birth certificate. John McCain equally criticized Trump, although McCain contributed to the degeneration of the political debate by catapulting Sarah Palin onto the national stage. His decision to pick her as his running mate in 2008 aimed to energize the Republican base rather than appeal to moderates.³⁶

According to conventional wisdom, hardline conservatism is basically limited to Trump or the Republican base, whereas the Republican establishment is moderate. In reality, the G.O.P. establishment has long defended

policies that are objectively far right by either U.S. historical standards or international standards. The rise of the Tea Party movement skewed perceptions by making hardline establishment conservatives like George W. Bush and John Boehner seem center right in comparison. Indeed, when the implacable Freedom Caucus succeeded in ousting Boehner as the Speaker of the House in 2015, various commentators depicted this as a rift between the “conservative” and “moderate” wings of the G.O.P. The same narrative emerged when then–House majority leader Eric Cantor unexpectedly lost his congressional seat to Dave Brat, a primary challenger who painted Cantor as a pusillanimous conservative. However, neither Boehner nor Cantor are moderates. Both played an active role in fomenting the radicalism of the Republican base after Obama’s election, such as by denouncing his “socialist” “takeover of health care,”³⁷ which was actually modeled on Republican plans.³⁸ As we will see, insurance under Obama’s limited reform was still primarily provided by private companies, and twenty-seven million people in the United States were projected to remain uninsured following its implementation.³⁹ It was not a radical reform.

Nevertheless, Boehner painted “Obamacare” as “Armageddon” and a “monstrosity” that would “ruin” America. “Your government is disrespecting you, your family, your job, your children,” he proclaimed at a 2010 rally prior to becoming Speaker. “Your government is out of control. Do you have to accept it? Do you have to take it?” Boehner answered his own questions: “Hell no, you don’t!” Interviewed on *60 Minutes*, he was literally in tears when explaining his desire for children to continue to “have a shot at the American Dream” in the Obama era. Boehner was not merely pandering to the Tea Party, given that he had already taken radical stances back in the 1990s, as when he led a drive to abolish the Department of Education and helped Newt Gingrich craft the “Contract with America.”⁴⁰ Asked about the need for “compromise” after the G.O.P. reclaimed the House in 2010, Boehner stated, “I reject the word.” While he was relatively more measured than the Freedom Caucus elements who sought his resignation, he fanned the flames that eventually brought about his downfall.

Criticism of this trend has often taken the form of “both-sides-ism” blaming extremists on each side for political gridlock. After suggesting that the ideologies of the Republican Party and the Obama administration were comparable, proponents of both-sides-ism argued that the rise of Donald Trump’s and Bernie Sanders’s anti-establishment campaigns proved that America has become a “land of extremes.” In fact, Trump and Sanders are not mirror

images. Several of Sanders's key proposals, such as universal health care, are broadly accepted by both the left and the right in other industrialized nations. Simply put, universal health care is not the equivalent of Trump's call to ban Muslims from America. And even though Sanders misrepresented or sugarcoated some of his plans, his rhetoric was incomparable to Trump's systematic disinformation and bigotry.

The agendas of Trump and the Republican establishment were more similar than many commentators realized. To be sure, Trump seemed marginally more moderate than traditional Republicans on certain economic issues, as when he expressed support for Social Security. Leaving his populist rhetoric aside, Trump's policies may worsen wealth inequality, from his vow to repeal "Obamacare" to his tax plan favoring the richest of the rich.⁴¹ In addition to economics, Trump and establishment Republicans took comparable stances on the alleged myth of climate change, the need to use torture in the "War on Terror," and other major issues, as we will see in later chapters. What commonly set Trump apart was rhetoric, style, and temperament. He unequivocally proved far less mentally stable, educated, thoughtful, and qualified to be president than Romney or various other traditional Republicans. But the ideological evolution of the Republican establishment contributed to Trump's rise.

Statistical analysis of voting patterns in Congress confirms that since the 1960s "the Republican Party has moved sharply to the right while the Democratic Party has moved, if not quite as dramatically, to the left."⁴² Another major study concluded that "Republicans in the North and South have moved sharply to the right," "moderate Democrats in the South have been replaced by Republicans," and the remaining Democrats "are somewhat more liberal" than 1960s Democrats on economic issues.⁴³ Both-sides-ism is a false narrative, as the G.O.P. has a demonstrably more hardline ideology.⁴⁴

The main disagreement among experts is about whether the polarization of elected officials truly reflects the public's views.⁴⁵ Certain political scientists doubt that American citizens are intensely polarized. The most prominent advocate of this perspective is the political scientist Morris Fiorina, who argues that partisan polarization is basically an elite phenomenon limited to politicians and activists. According to Fiorina, most Americans hold moderate or ambivalent views, although professional campaigners are convinced that mobilizing a base with extreme views is crucial to winning elections—a self-fulfilling prophecy if it turns moderates away from politics. From this angle, it appears that much of the public votes for hardline candidates because

there is little alternative under the two-party system.⁴⁶ Evidence indeed suggests that conservative politicians are likelier than liberal ones to overestimate public support for their agenda, which may partly explain why the modern G.O.P. takes hardline positions.⁴⁷ Still, its stances are not so far removed from the public's values that it fails to attract substantial support.⁴⁸ The average voter has also become more engaged and partisan over time, regardless of how politics repulses some people.⁴⁹ The most politically active citizens seem the most polarized.⁵⁰

A wide and growing body of evidence suggests that America is profoundly polarized by ideology, race, religion, and other factors. "Liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats" are now "almost extinct," as Alan Abramowitz describes in a book questioning Fiorina's theory of elite polarization.⁵¹ While Fiorina is undoubtedly correct that politicians play a significant role in polarization, the public is responsible too. Ordinary conservative and liberal citizens appear increasingly consistent in adopting partisan positions on all major issues.⁵² If politicians' views accurately reflect the public's views, it is because voters want politicians to represent *their* policy preferences—not some moderate mix of conservative and liberal views.⁵³

What else accounts for how polarization between Democrats and Republicans in Congress is the strongest since Americans fought over slavery?⁵⁴ One factor is partisan realignment, as the parties have homogenized in recent decades after long being hodgepodes of conservatives and liberals.⁵⁵ The Democratic Party notably enjoyed support among white segregationists who belonged to Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal coalition. But the South gradually became Republican once the Democrats backed the civil rights movement in the 1960s. The religious right's subsequent resurgence exacerbated the Democrats' difficulties in the Bible Belt. However, "southern realignment does not fully account for the increase in polarization. The Republican Party became much more conservative across all regions of the United States."⁵⁶

The G.O.P.'s growing radicalism has thus been a key factor in polarization, as contemporary conservative citizens "take extremely conservative positions on nearly all issues,"⁵⁷ hindering the chance of compromise with Democrats. Illustratively, 82 percent of consistent U.S. liberals believe in making compromises, next to barely 32 percent of consistent U.S. conservatives.⁵⁸ But both sides tend to see opponents' actions as illegitimate. A social study even concluded that "partisan animus in the American public exceeds racial hostility,"⁵⁹ a remarkable finding given persistent racial animus.

The relative popularity of Trump's unabashedly bigoted campaign only worsened racial tensions after the Ferguson crisis and other police shootings triggered the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement. Race relations in the last year of Obama's presidency were perceived as the worst in more than two decades according to polling data.⁶⁰ The receptiveness of many whites to Trump's message that they are losing their country is consistent with data showing that whites think that anti-white racism is now worse than anti-black racism.⁶¹ Trump lauded white supporters who assaulted black protestors at his rallies, characterized undocumented Mexican immigrants as "criminals" and "rapists," tweeted an anti-Semitic image of Hillary Clinton next to a Star of David, and broke new ground in modern America by insisting that all members of a religious group be barred from the country. A full 36 percent of Americans, including 59 percent of Republicans, agreed with his call to ban Muslims.⁶²

Xenophobia is not a new problem in the United States, as shown by the notorious Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and past opposition to immigration from Ireland, Italy, and other parts of Europe, not to forget hostility toward Jewish émigrés. But the animosity, fear, and resentment of modern white nativists is tied to a new development: whites might no longer be the majority of a diversifying U.S. population by 2050.⁶³

Religion is just as explosive an issue as race in America, given its "culture wars" over abortion, gay rights, and beyond. The religious right spurred state legislatures to pass a record number of abortion restrictions during Obama's presidency.⁶⁴ The partisan divide on abortion and religion has widened in recent decades.⁶⁵ Overall, whites who never attend church are drastically likelier to vote Democratic than whites who attend church weekly, especially evangelicals.⁶⁶

Fiorina remains skeptical about polarization due to "culture wars," which he describes as issues leaving the public ambivalent. Data from the historic 2008 election that won Obama the White House indeed show that 93 percent of voters considered the economy "extremely" or "very" important to their vote. More than 80 percent felt the same way about Iraq, health care, and education. Fewer voters, 50 and 36 percent respectively, had the same opinion about abortion and gay rights. Such figures lead Fiorina to conclude that abortion and homosexuality are marginal questions.⁶⁷ In my view, however, these statistics show that a considerable share of the public, between half and a third, finds them highly important.⁶⁸ At a minimum, culture war issues are extremely contentious in America by international standards. We

will see in Chapter 4 that few people in other Western nations embrace the ultratraditional morality representing a major side of America's culture wars.

Moreover, Americans are intensely divided along partisan lines on economic issues, as exemplified by conflicting attitudes toward Obama's health care reform.⁶⁹ Diverging economic perspectives relate to worsening wealth inequality since the 1980s. Neighborhoods are significantly segregated by class and race,⁷⁰ which affects children's life outcomes.⁷¹ Some people have no option but to live in certain neighborhoods—others choose to live in bubbles of like-minded individuals⁷² and follow ever more influential hyperpartisan media, such as Fox News or, to a lesser extent, MSNBC.⁷³ Meanwhile, the intensifying blue state–red state fracture appears to have decreased the number of swing states in presidential elections.⁷⁴ The sway of lobbying by moneyed interests has played a role in this trend by distorting the democratic process. A strong historical correlation exists between polarization and wealth inequality.⁷⁵

Last but not least, clashes over the role that America should play as the only global superpower contribute to social polarization. Americans were bitterly divided about the Bush administration's use of torture, its aim to detain alleged terrorists forever without trial, and its catastrophic invasion of Iraq on grounds later revealed to be false. The Obama administration's relatively distinct approach to foreign policy proved divisive too. We will return to this issue in depth in the book's final chapter.

Polarization does not mean that there are no independents or citizens who do not fall squarely within the categories of "liberal America" and "conservative America." People's beliefs cannot be perfectly categorized. Rather, the point is that conservative and liberal Americans increasingly live in different worlds shaped by profoundly different values.

Oceans Apart

Nowadays the basic worldview in liberal America is not only highly different from the one in conservative America but also generally *closer* to the dominant worldview in other Western nations when it comes to religion, government, and foreign policy. Sure, liberal and conservative Americans share a common culture, from the same language to traditional heritage and popular entertainment. For instance, New Englanders and Southerners may feel a special bond when they hear "The Star-Spangled Banner" before watching

the Super Bowl. Yet their values tend to diverge considerably on fundamental questions.

The list of issues below indicates that liberal Americans are often closer to other Westerners than to conservative Americans in their thinking. Naturally, this broad picture should not obscure key nuances. Americans are on the whole more skeptical than other Westerners of “big government.”⁷⁶ Few U.S. liberals want European-style welfare states or tax rates. Nevertheless, given the tremendous hostility to universal health care in conservative America, liberal Americans are manifestly closer to Europeans and other Westerners in accepting the idea of state-funded health care for everyone. Indeed, numerous Democrats wanted Obama’s health care reform to go further, by creating a “public option” insurance plan or a single-payer system, whereas Republicans categorically opposed expanding access to health care.⁷⁷ Besides, well-informed Americans know that Europe has far lower health care costs, partly due to pricing regulations that barely exist in America’s profit-driven medical system. The claim that “America cannot afford universal health care” rests on a false premise.

Beyond health care, various examples suggest that Republicans stand apart from other Westerners on many basic economic issues. Following the disastrous 2008 financial crisis, Republicans oddly grew more hostile to financial regulation. Disregarding how deregulation and Wall Street’s recklessness had contributed heavily to the financial meltdown, Republicans chiefly blamed the crisis on government overregulation, as we will see in Chapter 5. Similarly, in the aftermath of the massive BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010, the G.O.P. backed legislation that would have weakened regulation of offshore drilling.⁷⁸ These peculiar stances reflect the considerable influence of a radical ideology among U.S. conservatives: free-market fundamentalism. As described by Joseph Stiglitz, a winner of the Nobel Prize in Economics, market fundamentalists believe that virtually all economic problems stem from “big government,” regulation, and taxes.⁷⁹ Their staunch opposition to environmental laws is exacerbated by skepticism about climatology and modern science. Like U.S. liberals, most other Westerners take drastically more moderate or progressive positions on such issues.

The religiosity of Americans would seem to disprove the notion that U.S. liberals are closer to fellow Westerners than to U.S. conservatives.⁸⁰ Faith certainly has a far greater sociopolitical role in the United States than in other industrialized nations. Only a small, albeit growing, share of Americans do not believe in God.⁸¹ However, Americans are intensely

**ISSUES ON WHICH U.S. LIBERALS ARE GENERALLY
CLOSER TO OTHER WESTERNERS THAN TO
U.S. CONSERVATIVES**

- Universal health care
- Financial regulation
- Environmental regulation
- Climate change
- Opposition to substantial tax cuts for millionaires
- Opposition to unlimited corporate or tycoon spending on elections
- Perception of Trump and Tea Party as extreme/far right
- Perception of U.S. religious right as extreme/far right
- Rejection of literal interpretation of Bible
- Acceptance of theory of evolution
- Skepticism of biblical prophecies
- Support for a discretionary right to abortion
- Support for broad access to contraception
- Rejection of abstinence-only sexual education
- Tolerance of homosexuality
- Opposition to indefinite detention without trial at Guantánamo
- Opposition to torture
- Opposition to the invasion of Iraq
- Support for the United Nations and international law

divided between fundamentalist and liberal-moderate conceptions of Christianity. Fundamentalist Christians tend to interpret the Bible word for word, reject the theory of evolution in favor of a literal understanding of Genesis, deem apocalyptic biblical prophecies relevant to U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, support abstinence-only sexual education, oppose state funding for contraception, condemn abortion, and find homosexuality unacceptable. Chapters 3 and 4 make the case that this ultratraditional form of

Christianity is widespread in conservative America but not in liberal America or other Western countries.

Criminal justice is perhaps the biggest exception to the trend, as the attitudes of liberal Americans are decidedly closer to those of conservative Americans than to those of fellow Westerners on this question. American justice is harshest in the Deep South, but sentences in blue states remain extremely punitive by international standards. Democratic leaders commonly embrace the death penalty in principle and tend to express concerns only about its administration, such as racial discrimination or the risk of executing innocents. Other Westerners are more inclined to consider executions a moral affront to human dignity.⁸² Draconian prison terms are also routinely inflicted in blue states. Still, Republicans show a greater appetite for the most extreme punishments, such as executing juveniles or the mentally retarded—practices abolished in controversial Supreme Court decisions scorned by conservative judges like Antonin Scalia.⁸³

While we will explore other nuances, the gist of the argument holds true: conservative America stands out within the modern Western world in numerous ways. In other words, the issue is not whether Democrats are trying to turn America into Europe, as Republicans have charged. Rather, it is that liberal America is closer to Europe and other parts of the West than to conservative America on many of its political, social, and moral values. To a large extent, it is conservative America that is an exception in the modern Western world, since it is dominated by peculiar mindsets that have little to no weight elsewhere, including virulent anti-intellectualism, visceral anti-governmentalism, and fervent Christian fundamentalism. Because of their hardline ideological stances, U.S. conservatives are frequently unable to see eye to eye with U.S. liberals, whose views are moderate by Western standards.

That is not to say that polarization is unique to America. Divisions exist in all countries. What distinguishes America from other Western nations is that its polarization not only is more intense but also concerns very fundamental matters on which there is a general consensus elsewhere in the West. As a result, the U.S. political and social debate focuses on issues like whether people should have a right to medical treatment; whether tycoons, corporations, and lobbies should be allowed to donate unlimited sums to political campaigns; whether financial and environmental regulations should be utterly eviscerated; whether global warming is a hoax; whether evolution or creationism should be taught in public schools; whether women should have a discretionary right to abortion; whether public health insurance should

cover contraception; whether abstinence-only sexual education should be required; whether people should have an unbridled right to bear arms; whether to have mass incarceration; whether to inflict life sentences on juveniles; whether to abolish the death penalty; whether to torture alleged terrorists and detain them forever without trial; whether to respect or defy international human rights treaties; whether to embrace diplomacy or a unilateral foreign policy; whether strife in the Middle East fulfills apocalyptic biblical prophecies; and whether shutting down the government is an acceptable response to seemingly unresolvable conflict. People elsewhere in the modern Western world may have vigorous and acrimonious disagreements, yet these are not the kinds of basic issues that usually divide them.⁸⁴

Immigration is an exception, since it has become a divisive issue in America, Europe, and other parts of the West. Nativist movements have played a leading role in efforts to dismantle the European Union and return to an age with no open borders or international institutions. However, the rise of bigoted far-right parties in Europe should not eclipse how its mainstream parties have been moving in the same direction on numerous core issues.⁸⁵ Again, my point is not that Europeans have a consensus about all political matters but that the issues dividing them are less fundamental than those dividing Americans.

That is why Europeans, who closely follow U.S. presidential elections, have overwhelmingly supported Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, and John Kerry over Donald Trump, Mitt Romney, John McCain, and George W. Bush in their bids for the White House. According to a 2012 poll of around 7,500 people in Britain, Denmark, France, Germany, Norway, and Sweden, an astounding 90 percent of Europeans would have voted for Obama over Romney.⁸⁶ This confirms that even European right-wingers have far more affinities with U.S. liberals than with U.S. conservatives, whose views come across as peculiar and extreme in the modern Western world. Amusingly, the British Parliament actually debated whether to ban Trump from visiting the United Kingdom.

In various ways, the gulf is between conservative America and not merely the rest of the West—but the rest of the world. A poll conducted in forty-five countries covering nearly three-quarters of the global population found massive support for Clinton over Trump. Russians were alone in saying they would have voted for Trump.⁸⁷ This is not a new development. The vast majority of countries worldwide welcomed, if not celebrated, Obama's election in 2008.⁸⁸ That was partly an adverse reaction to George W. Bush's foreign policy. Obama's

charisma had additionally swept the international community off its feet. The son of a white American mother and a black Kenyan father, the nation's first African-American president represented the rise of a more equal and open-minded America—the side of the country that much of the world admires.

Obama's efforts to expand access to health care against categorical Republican opposition were again revealing. In addition to other Western democracies, most nations worldwide have either established universal health care or aspire to. For example, Japan has had a top-notch universal health care system for decades.⁸⁹ South Korea established one in 1989.⁹⁰ Taiwan did so in 1994 following a bipartisan reform movement at around the same time as Republicans torpedoed Bill and Hillary Clinton's health care reform.⁹¹ Mexico is on its way toward establishing universal health care.⁹² South Africa has taken steps in that direction too. The constitution it ratified after apartheid is viewed as a model for its human rights provisions, which are partly guiding aspirations to address enduring inequality. The South African Constitution notably provides that "everyone has the right to have access to . . . health care services, including reproductive health care."⁹³

For all these reasons, it was not solely liberal Americans who were stunned as an increasingly radical G.O.P. heatedly denounced the "tyranny" of "Obamacare" and other moderate reforms by the Obama administration. Both liberals and conservatives in other Western democracies—not to mention scores of people in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and beyond—were struck by the magnitude of the ideological backlash against the Obama administration in conservative America. In all likelihood, the international community will strongly favor the Democratic opposition over Donald Trump throughout his presidency.

Exceptionalism and Decline

The Republicans' partisan redefinition of "American exceptionalism" was evidently a political strategy. But persistent claims about Obama's lack of faith in the nation's greatness and his aim to transform America into lowly Europe reflected broader concerns about American decadence. Around 71 percent of Americans are convinced that the United States' global standing is declining,⁹⁴ and 54 percent think that it is facing the start of a long-term decline when it will lose its place as the world's leading country.⁹⁵

Certain developments may indeed be interpreted as signs of American decline. Soaring wealth inequality. The surge of the U.S. incarceration rate

to world-record levels. Presidents claiming the authority to detain any alleged terrorist forever without judicial review, which would have been unthinkable on September 10, 2001. The Bush administration's reintroduction of torture as an official practice in Western civilization. Republican promises to bring back torture after Obama discontinued its use. The regression of Republican leadership from thoughtful moderates like Dwight Eisenhower to the demagogue Donald Trump. And so on.

Another interpretation could be that America has made tremendous progress. The election of a black president appeared impossible a generation ago. Despite continuing discrimination, LGBTQ people have taken strides toward equality, culminating in the hard-won right to same-sex marriage—again, an unthinkable step one or two decades earlier.

However, many of these trends may be interpreted as historical cycles rather than as American decline or progress.⁹⁶ Periods of soaring wealth inequality are far from unprecedented. Because of the dismantlement of the New Deal model beginning in the 1980s, wealth in America is essentially as unequally distributed now as it was in the 1920s prior to the Great Depression.⁹⁷ The senseless Iraq War evokes the Vietnam War. Human rights abuses, social injustices, and racial discrimination have recurred throughout American history, alongside periods of social progress. The ignoramus Trump is only the most glaring example of the longstanding anti-intellectual subculture discussed in the next chapter. The intransigence of today's Christian fundamentalists recalls prior cultural battles.

Polarization has made America a particularly difficult country to govern, yet that is an old problem too. Compared to other democracies, the U.S. political system is exceptionally fragmented, due to the combination of federalism and the separation of powers, which greatly hamper the national government's ability to implement systemic reforms.⁹⁸ This challenge is compounded by the Senate's adoption of a filibuster rule that permits the stonewalling of legislation unless a supermajority of sixty senators agree to support it. Both parties have historically resorted to the filibuster, but its use reached record levels during Obama's presidency because of the G.O.P.'s systematic obstructionism.⁹⁹ Elsewhere in the democratic world, legislation can normally be passed by a simple majority vote. Similarly, other nations can ratify international treaties by a simple majority vote, whereas the U.S. Constitution requires two-thirds of the Senate to do so. The Senate has never ratified an international human rights treaty when it had fewer than fifty-five Democratic members.¹⁰⁰ In sum, these supermajoritarian institutional

devices preclude majority rule, thereby empowering minorities of Republican hardliners to block reforms and international treaties.

The Electoral College further hinders democracy. Like Hillary Clinton, Al Gore won the popular vote in a crucial election but never became president, since he lost the Electoral College. The outcome of the 2000 presidential contest might have been different if the Supreme Court had not seemingly handed the election to George W. Bush by halting the Florida ballot recount. It would not have come down to that in nearly all other democracies, because they lack electoral colleges. America's unusual voting system is a vestige of an oppressive era. Back in the eighteenth century, Southern states feared that a direct presidential election would lead them to be outvoted, as they had fewer eligible white voters than Northern states. The resulting compromise was an electoral college under which Southern states received votes proportional to three-fifths of their sizable slave populations, in addition to those for their free populations.¹⁰¹ The fact that America still employs an anachronistic electoral system largely created to accommodate slavery exemplifies a broader issue. It is often said that America is a young nation, but it is also an old democracy. It has the oldest written national constitution in use anywhere in the world, which has been a mixed blessing by fostering both stability and immobilism.

Yet institutional peculiarities only go so far in explaining political gridlock in modern America. For instance, the political scientist David Mayhew has noted that "if majority rule is in principle the preferred standard, conditions may be bad in the Senate today but weren't they even worse in the past?" The threshold to defeat a filibuster was "an even higher two-thirds vote between 1917 and 1975 (that would mean 67 senators today, not 60)."¹⁰² Major systemic reforms were nonetheless achieved during the New Deal era, when a relative bipartisan consensus supported a more equitable economic model.

While peculiar institutions enable hardliners to use obstructionist tactics or exercise excessive leverage over policy-making, the fundamental issue remains why they wish to do so. We saw earlier that the main reason for the acute polarization of modern American society is the Republican Party's shift toward the far right in recent decades. Republican leaders insist that America is declining because it is becoming less exceptional, due to the toll of Obama's "un-American" and "socialist" presidency. In fact, America remains very exceptional, and certain features of American exceptionalism may contribute to its decline. These features are mainly concentrated in

conservative America: profound anti-intellectualism, visceral anti-governmentalism, and Christian fundamentalism. They foster a purist, far-right ideology that is hostile to compromise and impedes rational decision-making and problem-solving.

Additional evidence suggests that the peculiar ideology of contemporary U.S. conservatives plays a greater role than peculiar U.S. institutions in shaping American society. Indeed, the fact that legislatures in other Western democracies can adopt national reforms by a simple majority vote would theoretically make it easier for their conservatives to abolish national health insurance or abortion. But such radical policies are hardly on the conservative agenda in other Western nations. Universal health care is broadly accepted there across the left and right. Abortion also tends to be broadly accepted in other Western democracies, except for a few countries, including Ireland, Poland, Spain, and Portugal. For example, we will see in Chapter 4 that although France's legalization of abortion in 1975 was a fierce battle, French conservatives largely moved on within a decade and now widely support abortion rights. By contrast, American conservatives are far less inclined to move on from the social and economic battles that they have lost. Some have been eager to relitigate them for years and years. Trump was elected partly by vowing to repeal "Obamacare" and appoint Supreme Court justices who will reverse *Roe v. Wade*, the landmark 1973 decision that recognized a constitutional right to abortion. That is because the conception of "conservatism" tends to be far less moderate and far more ideological in America—notwithstanding the growing power of fringe far-right parties or the hardening rhetoric of certain mainstream right-wing parties in Europe.

America is not alone in struggling nowadays. Democracy has yet to fulfill its promise in much of the world. However, there was a time when America was among the countries paving the way toward progress.