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An Exceptional Nation? American Political Values in Comparative Perspective

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This paper compares the political values and viewpoints of Americans with those of citizens of 19 other wealthy democracies. Drawing on the long history of scholarship and debate about “American Exceptionalism,” we ask whether Americans’ positions on issues of governance, taxation, equality, religion, and morality are significantly different from those of people in comparable countries in Europe and elsewhere. Using data from the International Social Survey Program’s Role of Government survey, the World Values Survey, and other sources, we show that, on almost all of these questions, Americans’ views are on average substantially to the right of those of people in our comparison countries: Americans are less supportive of redistribution and government intervention in the economy, are more likely to blame poverty on the failings of the poor, and are by far more religious. These findings confirm that Americans are on the whole more right-leaning than Europeans, Canadians, Australians, New Zealanders, and the Japanese.



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Table of Contents

1	Introduction	
	Left-Right Values	5
	Freedom over Equality	5
	Tolerance of Inequality	.....	6
	Anti-Statism	.....	9
	Blaming the Poor for Poverty	.....	10
	Left-Right Values Index	.....	12
	Meritocracy	.....	14
	Religiosity	.....	16
	Religiosity Index	.....	20
	Patriotism	.....	22
	Cultural Conservatism	.....	24
	Social and Cultural Conservatism Index	.....
28	Militarism	.....
29	Military Index	.....
32	Conclusion	.....	33
	References	.....	36

List of Figures

Figure	Title	Page
1	Freedom is More Important Than Equality	5
2	Freedom to Pursue Life's Goals Without State Interference More Important than State Guaranteeing That No One is in Need	6
3	It Should Not be the Responsibility of Government to Reduce Income Difference	7
4	It Should Not be the Responsibility of Government to Provide for the Unemployed	8
5	It is Fair for a Secretary Who is a Better Worker to be Paid More	8
6	Government Has Too Much Power	9
7	Private Ownership of Business is Preferable to Government Ownership	10
8	People are in Need Because of Laziness and Lack of Willpower (Not an Unfair Society)	11
9	Left-Right Values Index	12
10	Success is Determined by Hard Work (Rather than Luck and Connections)	14
11	Disagree that "Success in Life is Pretty Much Determined by Forces Outside our Control"	15
12	Belief in God	17
13	Belief in Heaven	17
14	Belief in Hell	18
15	Religion is Very Important in My Life	18
16	Moments of Prayer or Meditation	19
17	Attend Church Weekly (Or More Often)	19
18	Religiosity Index	20
19	Consider Myself "Christian" First (Ahead of My Nationality)	21
20	Very Proud to be [Nationality] Average 1981-2006	22
21	Very Proud to be [Nationality] 2006	23
22	Abortion is Unjustifiable	25
23	Use of Marijuana or Hashish Is Unjustifiable	25
24	Homosexuality is Unjustifiable	26
25	Divorce is Unjustifiable	26
26	Extra-Martial Affairs are Unjustifiable	27
27	Social and Cultural Conservation Index	28
28	Pre-Emptive Force is Sometimes Justified	29
29	Should Have UN Approval Before Using Military Force to Deal with International Threats	30
30	It is Sometimes Necessary to Use Military Force to Maintain Order in the World	31

Abstract

This paper compares the political values and viewpoints of Americans with those of citizens of 19 other wealthy democracies. Drawing on the long history of scholarship and debate about “American Exceptionalism,” we ask whether Americans’ positions on issues of governance, taxation, equality, religion, and morality are significantly different from those of people in comparable countries in Europe and elsewhere. Using data from the International Social Survey Program’s Role of Government survey, the World Values Survey, and other sources, we show that, on almost all of these questions, Americans’ views are on average substantially to the right of those of people in our comparison countries: Americans are less supportive of redistribution and government intervention in the economy, are more likely to blame poverty on the failings of the poor, and are by far more religious. These findings confirm that Americans are on the whole more right-leaning than Europeans, Canadians, Australians, New Zealanders, and the Japanese.

Introduction

The subject of our paper is America's political values in comparative perspective. This is a subject that dates back to the earliest days of the Republic when there was a widespread sense – among Americans and Europeans alike – that the people of the United States were somehow different, in both beliefs and behavior, from the people of any other nation. “The Americans,” Tocqueville wrote in his classic work, *Democracy in America*, “are in an exceptional situation, and it is unlikely that any other democratic people will be similarly placed” (Tocqueville, 1969: 455).

So begins the rich and checkered history of the idea of “American exceptionalism” – a history that runs from Tocqueville through Werner Sombart's *Why Is There No Socialism in the United States* and Louis Hartz's *The Liberal Tradition in America* through Seymour Lipset's many works, most notably his 1996 volume, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword*, and John Kingdon's neglected but penetrating volume, *America the Unusual* (Sombart, 1976; Hartz, 1955; Lipset, 1996; Kingdon, 1999).

For decades a widely influential framework that informed the writings of critics and defenders of the American social order alike, the theory of American exceptionalism has in recent decades come under sustained assault. The first critiques came in the 1980s from left-of-center historians such as Eric Foner and Sean Wilentz, and raised searching questions about the literature, addressing the issue at the center of the classic debate about “American exceptionalism”: why the United States, alone among advanced capitalist societies, had never generated a genuinely mass socialist party (Foner, 1984; Wilentz, 1984).

But the critique of “American exceptionalism” intensified in the ensuing decades as popular usage of the term, which had historically been an analytical and scholarly concept focused on the nature and causes of American distinctiveness, was fundamentally transformed and entered into mainstream popular and academic discourse as a kind of synonym for American superiority. By 1995, a prominent American historian, speaking for much of the discipline, wrote that the theory of American exceptionalism was now in “ill repute” (quoted in Fischer, 2010: 13).

It is not our purpose here to rescue the theory of American exceptionalism; given the association of the term today not with the eminently defensible notion that the United States is in many ways quite different from other wealthy democratic societies (that it is, to use a term popularized by Malcolm Gladwell (2008), an “outlier”), but that it is fundamentally superior to them, we have no wish to defend “American exceptionalism” as it has now come to be defined¹. But we do wish to examine the idea that the United States in many ways remains an “outlier” among nations.

The particular claim that we wish to focus on is that American political values are unusual when compared to those of other wealthy democratic countries. John Kingdon has put the central idea succinctly: the “political center of gravity” of the United States, he argues, is to the right of that in other advanced, industrial societies (Kingdon, 1999). In our presentation, we will subject this claim to systematic empirical scrutiny, drawing on data on 20 countries from three main sources: the World Values Survey, the International Social Survey Program, and the Pew Global Attitudes Project.

¹ See for example, Gingrich (2011) and D’Souza (2002). For both authors, American exceptionalism clearly implies that the United States, is not only different from, but superior to other countries.

To address the question of the distinctiveness of American political values, we will focus on nine hypotheses that are central to the claim that the values of Americans remain different from – and in many ways, to the right of – the public of other wealthy democratic countries. The nine hypotheses are that

Compared to people in other wealthy democracies:

1. Americans value freedom more than they value equality.
2. Americans have a greater tolerance for inequality.
3. Americans are more anti-statist.
4. Americans are more inclined to blame poor people for their poverty.
5. Americans are more inclined to believe that their stratification system is open and meritocratic.
6. Americans are more religious.
7. Americans are more patriotic.
8. Americans are more socially and culturally conservative.
9. Americans are more militaristic.

The twenty countries in the study are all democratic and have high standards of living.

They overlap heavily with the countries included in the other empirical examinations of advanced industrial societies², and they are all members of the OECD:

- o North America:
 - Canada
 - United States
- o Oceania:
 - Australia
 - New Zealand

² See, for example, the works by Pontusson (2005), and Wilensky (2002).

- O Scandinavia:
 - Denmark
 - Finland
 - Norway
 - Sweden

- O Non-Scandinavian Europe:
 - Austria
 - Belgium
 - France
 - Germany
 - Greece
 - Ireland
 - Italy
 - Netherlands
 - Spain
 - Switzerland
 - United Kingdom

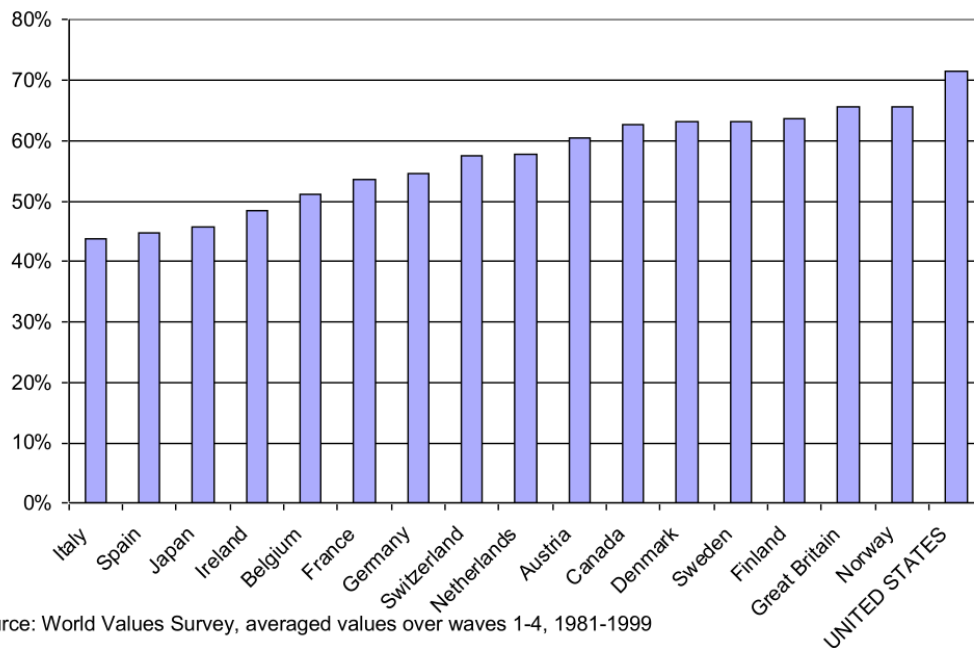
- O Asia:
 - Japan

Left-Right Values

Freedom over Equality

One of the key ways America is exceptional, according to Lipset (1996), is that Americans value freedom over equality much more than citizens of other countries do. We found two surveys which included questions asking respondents to compare the importance they place on personal freedom with the importance of equality or the provision of basic necessities. The World Values Survey asked this question in its first four waves, but the last time the question was asked of US respondents was in wave three, in 1989. While the US had the highest percentage of people choosing "freedom" over equality on average across the four waves (Figure 1), Finland actually had the highest level of agreement that freedom is more important in 1989 (not shown).

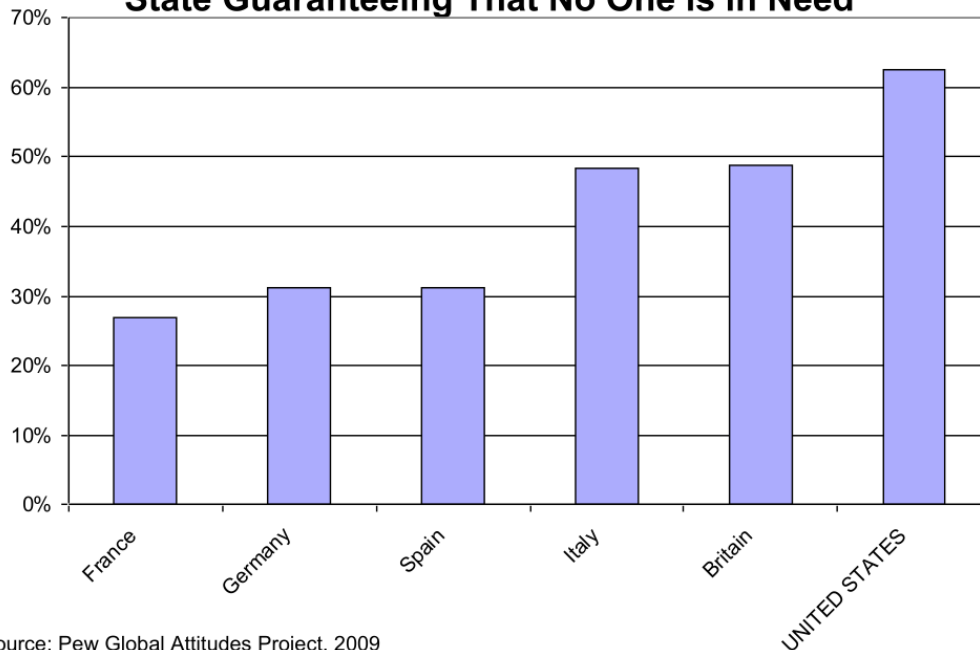
Figure 1: Freedom is More Important Than Equality



More Recently, Pew asked a similar question to respondents in a smaller sample of countries, though with broadly similar results: the United States again shows the highest level of support for freedom (from government interference), this time as compared with

guaranteed provision of basic necessities. The United States, Britain, France, and Germany are all in the same positions relative to one another in both datasets; only Spain's position relative to the other countries appears to have moved, from the far left/equality side to a position in the middle of the spectrum (Figure 2), though the shift is modest.

Figure 2: Freedom to Pursue Life's Goals Without State Interference More Important than State Guaranteeing That No One is in Need



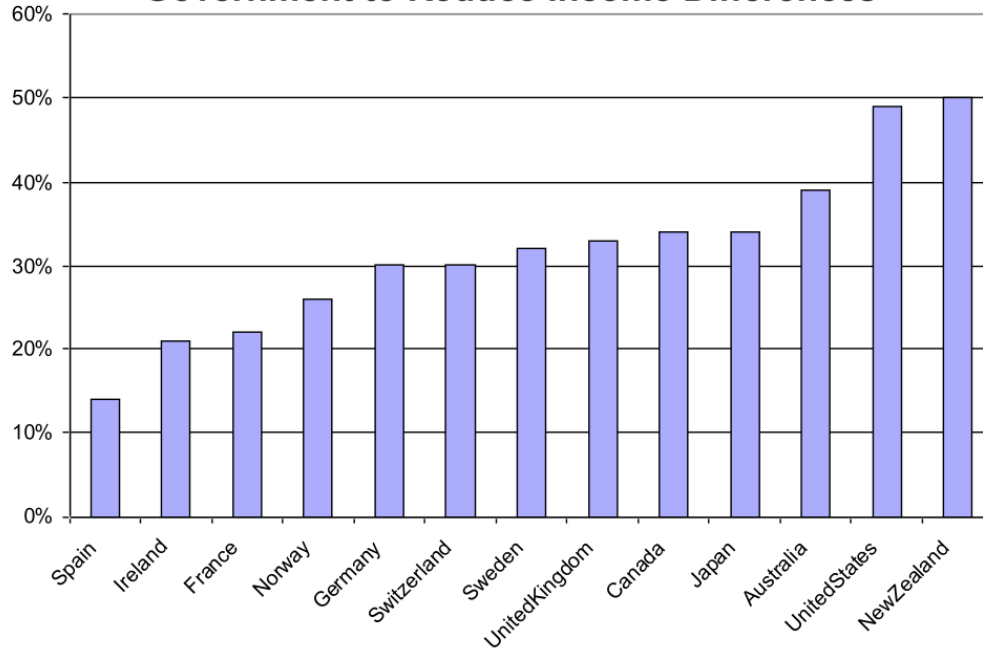
Source: Pew Global Attitudes Project, 2009

Tolerance of Inequality

A number of scholars and observers, on both the left and the right, have noted that Americans are generally more comfortable with inequality than people in other nations (Birchfield, 2008; Bowman, 2009; Lipset, 1996; Osberg and Smeeding, 2006). We identified three good measures of tolerance for inequality: two questions from the International Social Survey Program about whether government should reduce income differences or provide for the unemployed, and one from the World Values Survey about the fairness of linking pay to job performance. On each of these three measures, the United States is the second-farthest to the right, after New Zealand. Americans and New

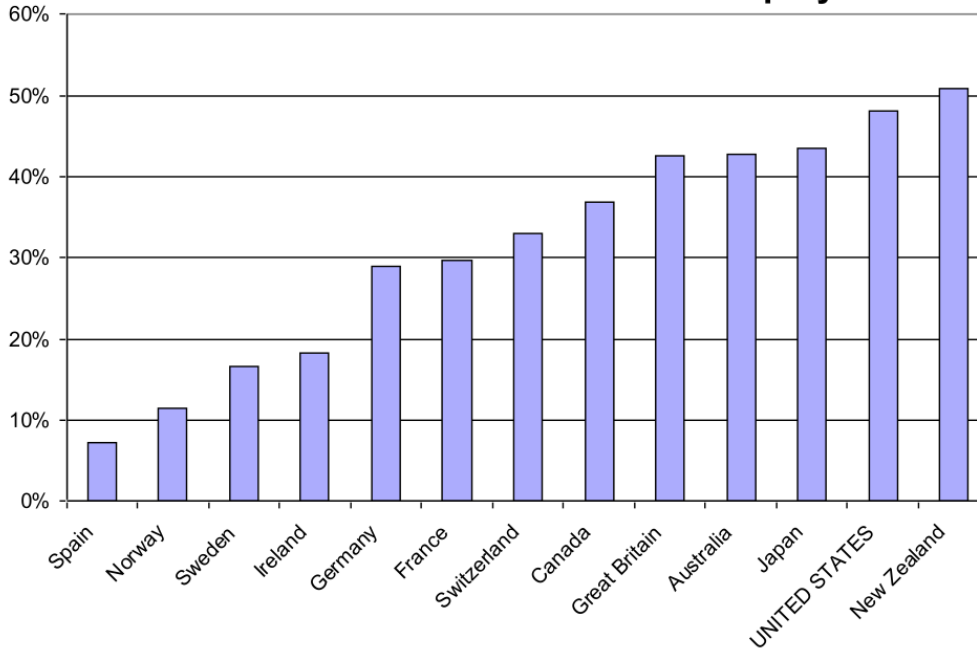
Zealanders express the least support for government intervention to reduce inequality (Figure 3) or support people without jobs (Figure 4), and the most comfort with paying a secretary who does her job well more than one who does the same job poorly (Figure 5). On both ISSP questions, the five English-speaking countries in our sample occupy five of the six most right-ward positions, along with Japan. This clustering of the English-speaking countries is a pattern we see repeatedly, although not unchangingly. These countries' partially shared histories and similar institutional arrangements may be responsible for this pattern.

Figure 3: It Should Not be the Responsibility of Government to Reduce Income Differences



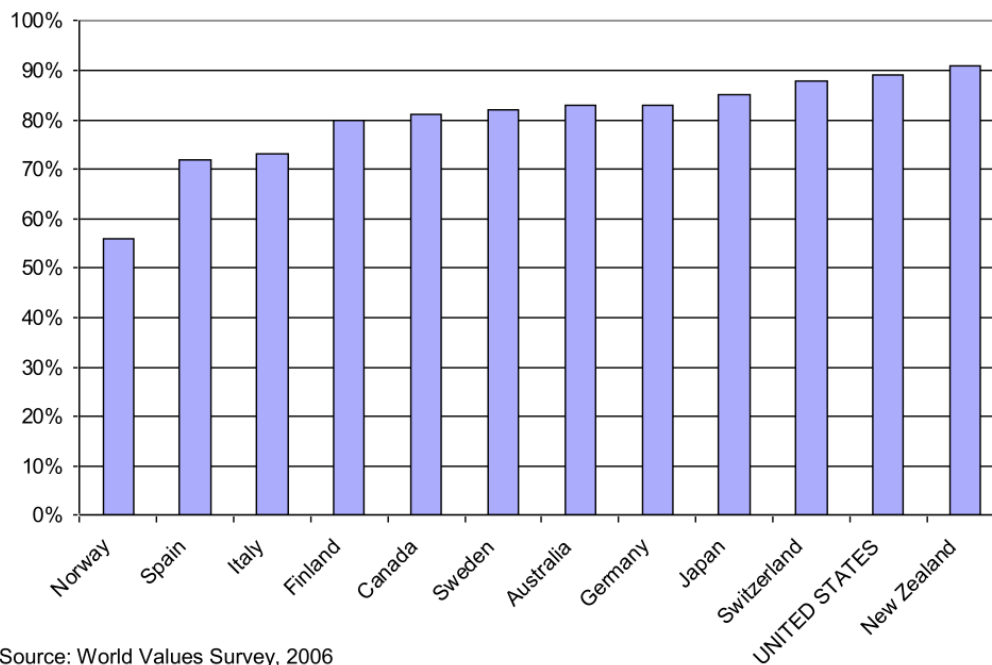
Source: International Social Survey Program, Role of Government Module, 2006

Figure 4: It Should Not be the Responsibility of Government to Provide for the Unemployed



Source: International Social Survey Program, Role of Government Module, 2006

Figure 5: It is Fair for a Secretary Who is a Better Worker to be Paid More

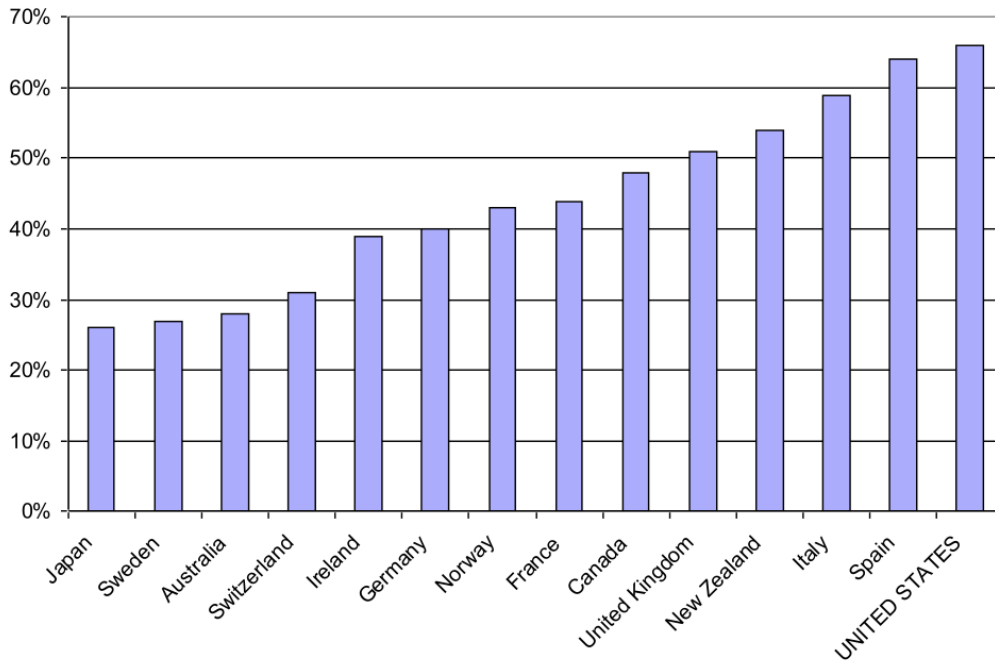


Source: World Values Survey, 2006

Anti-Statism

Lipset described Americans as “the most anti-statist people in the developed world” (1996: 71); Bowman (2009) and Kingdon (1999) agreed, although Baldwin (2009) presents some contrary evidence. We use two measures to evaluate anti-statism: one each from the International Social Survey Program and the World Values Survey. Both show the United States on the far right on this issue. While we aimed to only include questions that were normative or absolute (rather than asking about conditions which vary from one country to the next), we could not find any survey items which measured anti-statism without referencing the “government” of the respondent’s country. Thus, there was no better operationalization of anti-statist sentiment than the question from ISSP about government’s power. Even though the government in the United States has less power in most arenas than governments in other countries, people in the United States are still the most likely to agree that their government has too much power (Figure 6).

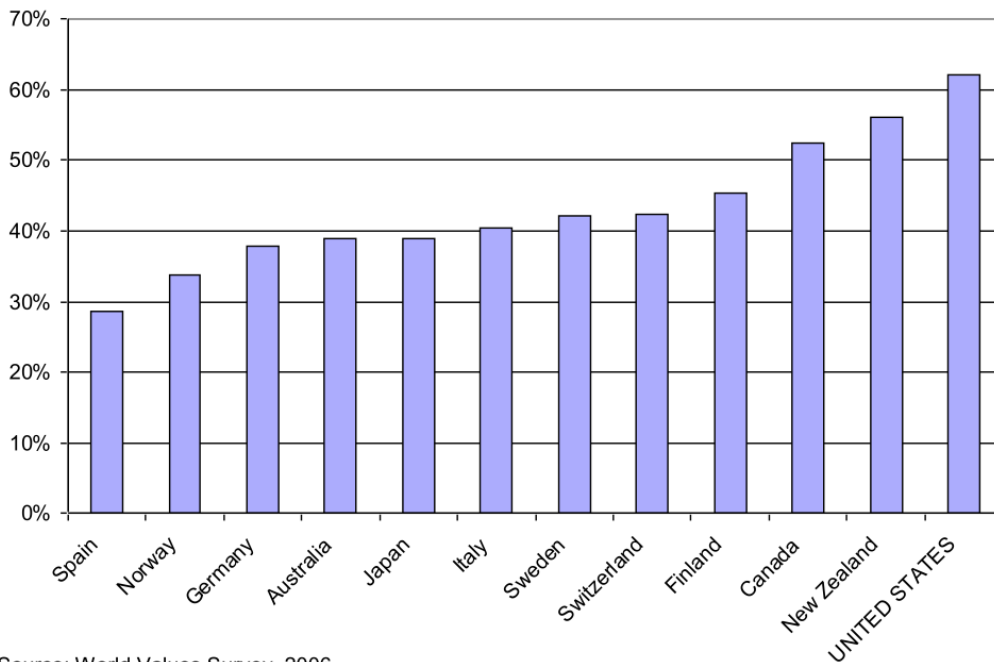
Figure 6: Government Has Too Much Power



Source: International Social Survey Program, Role of Government Module, 1996

People in the United States are also most likely to agree that private ownership of business is preferable to government ownership (Figure 8). While this finding is consistent with a broad literature (see, for example, Lipset and Marks 2000; Sombart 1976) showing longstanding popular hostility to socialism in the United States, it is striking that although there is a significant shift in most countries' position in the left-right ranking between these two questions, the United States has the most anti-statist position on both measures.

Figure 7: Private Ownership of Business is Preferable to Government Ownership



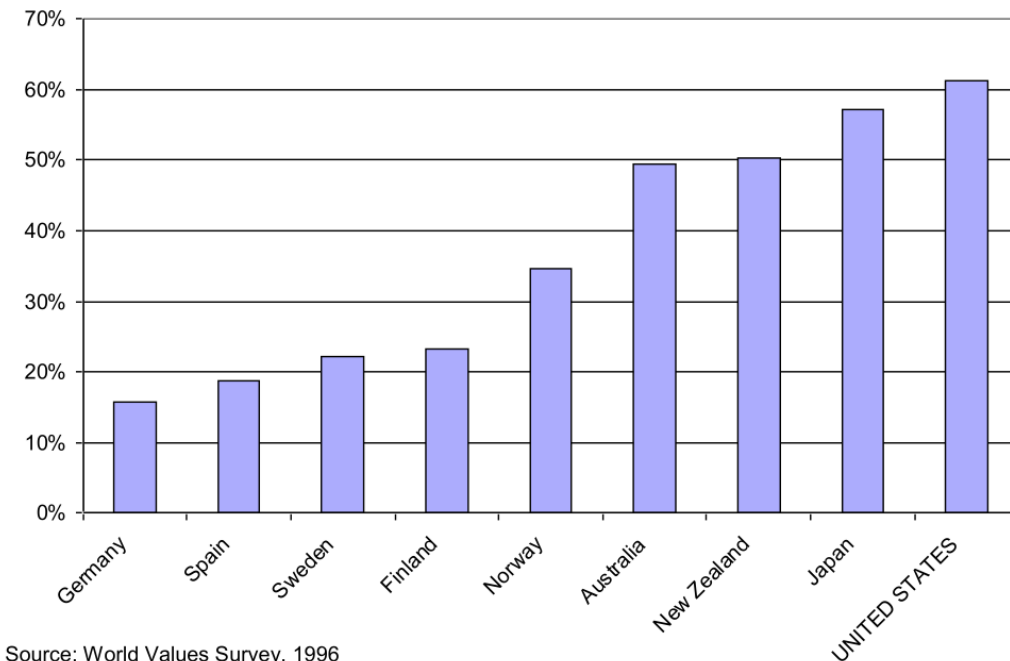
Source: World Values Survey, 2006

Blaming the Poor for Poverty

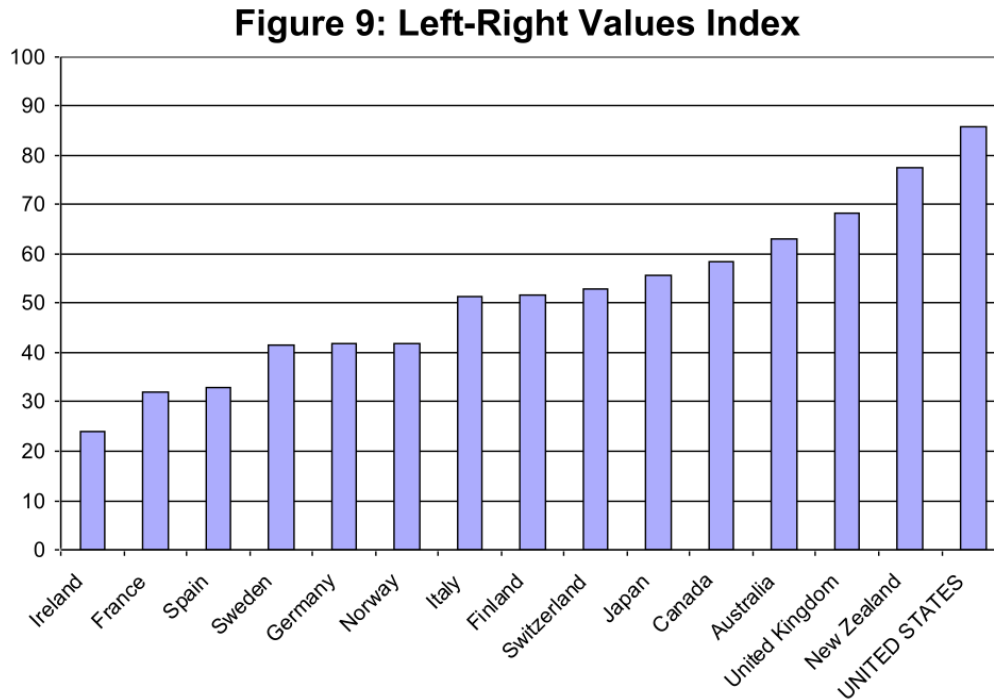
In their book on differences in approaches to poverty between the United States and Europe, Alesina and Glaeser argue that there are “extreme differences in beliefs about the poor between the United States and Europe” (2004:186). While we only found one satisfactory cross-national measure of opinions on this issue, it is a very direct operationalization of the question: the World Values Survey asked people to choose between two possible answers to the question of why there are some people who live in

need: they are either “poor because of laziness and lack of will power” or “poor because of an unfair society.” Once again, the United States is in the right-most position, with over 60% - nearly four times the percentage in Germany - agreeing that bad character rather than society is the cause of individual poverty. And here, as in many other instances, we see the clustering of attitudes among the English-speaking, liberal market economy countries along the right side of the distribution (along with Japan in this case).

Figure 8: People are in Need Because of Laziness and Lack of Willpower (Not an Unfair Society)



Left-Right Values Index



Average of 8 indicators, standardized to range from 0 -100.
Only countries with 4 or more indicators included.

The United States has the most, or second-most, right-wing average opinion for each of the eight survey questions we examined above:

- two measures of belief in freedom over equality,
- three measures of tolerance for inequality,
- two measures of anti-statism,
- one measure of blaming the poor.

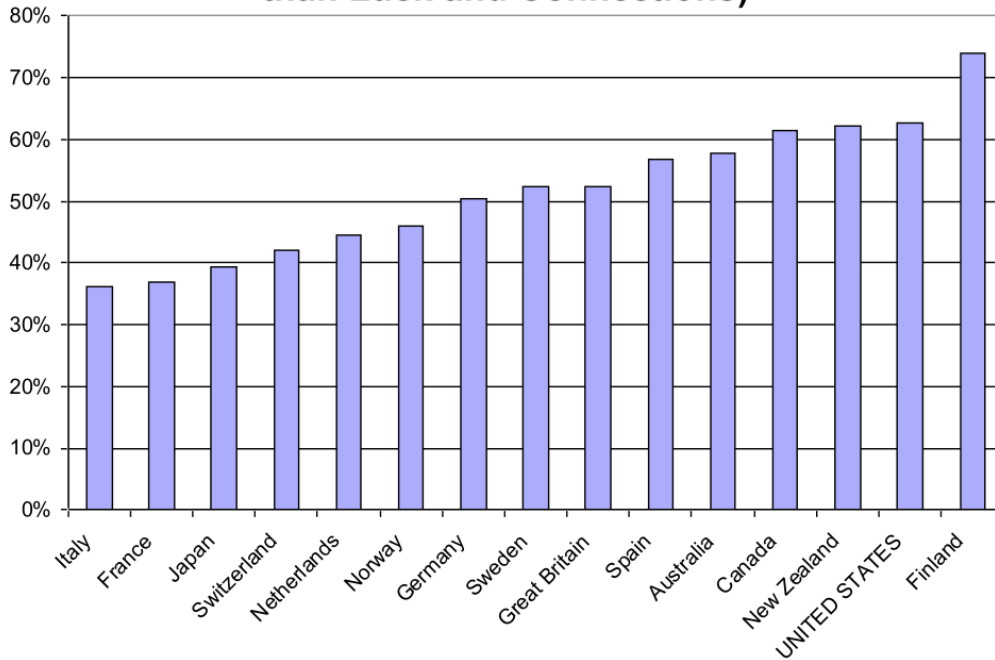
To summarize this, Figure 9 presents an Index of Left-Right values. We created this index by first standardizing each of the previous items so that the country with the right-most average opinion received a score of 100. The country with the left-most average opinion received a score of 0, and the other countries received scores corresponding to their relative position on the original item, so that distances between any two countries on the standardized scale are proportional to the scores on the original item. This method of standardization preserves information about which countries are close to one another on various items, but obscures differences in the original ranges: i.e., whether

the difference between the country with the least and most right-leaning opinions on an issue is 15 percentage points or 50, the difference between them on the standardized scale will be 100 points. While other methods of standardization produce some changes to ordering of the countries in the middle of the scale, the essential results remain unchanged.

Most importantly for the questions of this paper, the United States comes out noticeably to the right of all 19 other countries in this study, confirming the Kingdon hypothesis that the “center of gravity” in the United States is in fact significantly right-leaning. Some commentators believe that the anti-poor and anti-redistributive (or at least against means-tested aid to the poor) tilt of American public opinion is partly attributable to white racism (Gilens, 1999); whatever the cause, it is clear that Americans are more tolerant of inequality and more likely to blame the poor, as well as generally more concerned with freedom and more anti-statist than those in other countries. There are a few other notable results as well: the Liberal Market Economies are all grouped together on the right, but it is countries with strong Catholic majorities, rather than the famously redistributive Scandinavian nations, which are found in the three left-most positions.

Meritocracy

Figure 10: Success is Determined by Hard Work (Rather than Luck and Connections)



Source: World Values Survey, 2006

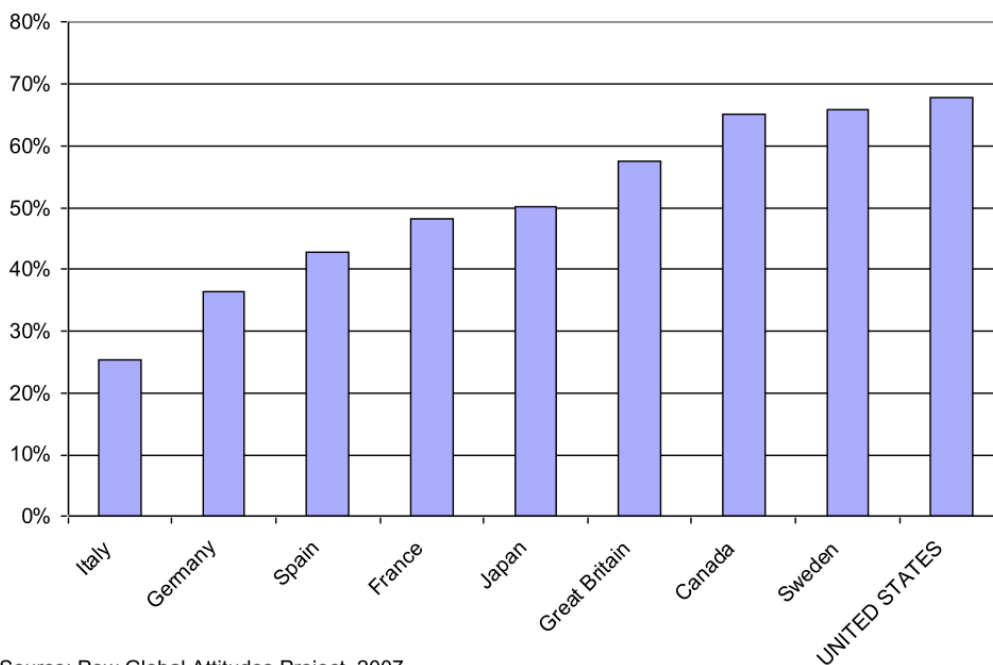
Many commentators and scholars have noted that people in the United States are most likely to believe we live in a meritocracy with a great deal of intergenerational mobility (Alesina and Glaeser, 2004; Keene and Ladd, 1990; Kingdon, 1999; Krugman, 2012; Lipset, 1996); this is often suggested as an explanation for many of the anti-redistributive beliefs which put the country on the far right of the Left-Right values index (e.g. Alesina, Di Tella, and MacCulloch, 2004). The reasoning here is clear: if everyone has an equal opportunity to do well, or if all that is required for a comfortable life is sufficient effort, it follows that the poor have only themselves to blame and redistribution is undesirable.

We include two measures of the belief that the stratification system is open and meritocratic. First, Figure 10 shows responses to a World Values Survey item which asks people to choose one end of a 10-point-scale, with 1 corresponding to "In the long run, hard work usually brings a better life" and 10 to "Hard work doesn't generally bring

success – it’s more a matter of luck and connections." The percentage reported is those giving answers from 1 to 4. Next, a Pew question asked people whether they agreed or disagreed that success is mostly outside of our control; Figure 11 reports the percentage disagreeing.

The United States is at the high end of percentages of people who believe that their lives are in their own hands, determined neither by fate nor by limitations imposed by society, although it is behind Finland on the World Values Survey question and very close to New Zealand and Canada; Sweden is not far behind the United States on the Pew question. These questions could be interpreted as evidence for a kind of individualism, as well as evidence for belief in meritocracy; at any rate, the two ideas complement each other. Overall, people in the United States are the most likely (with the exception of Finland) to believe that their fate is in their own hands, rather than determined by outside forces or the society at large.

Figure 11: Disagree that “Success in Life is Pretty Much Determined by Forces Outside our Control”



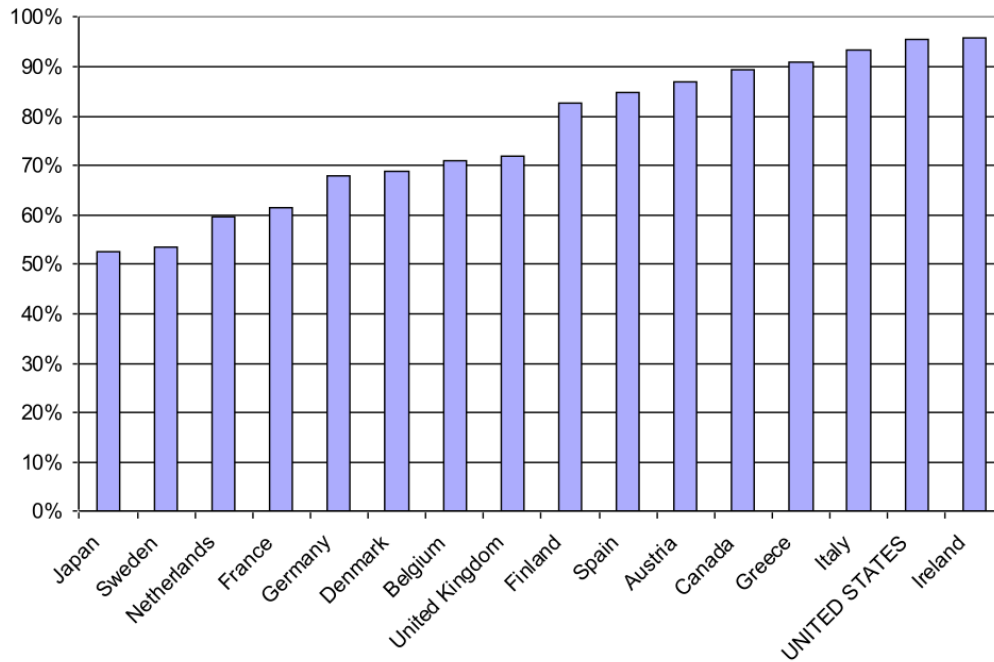
Source: Pew Global Attitudes Project, 2007

Religiosity

There is fairly widespread agreement from Tocqueville onward that Americans are much more religious than most Europeans and people in other developed nations (Bowman, 2009; Keene and Ladd, 1990; Lipset, 1996; Tocqueville, 2003). Inglehart is perhaps the most prominent exponent of the claim that generally greater development leads to lower levels of religiosity, and has thus highlighted the United States' exceptional character in this regard (Inglehart and Welzel, 2005).

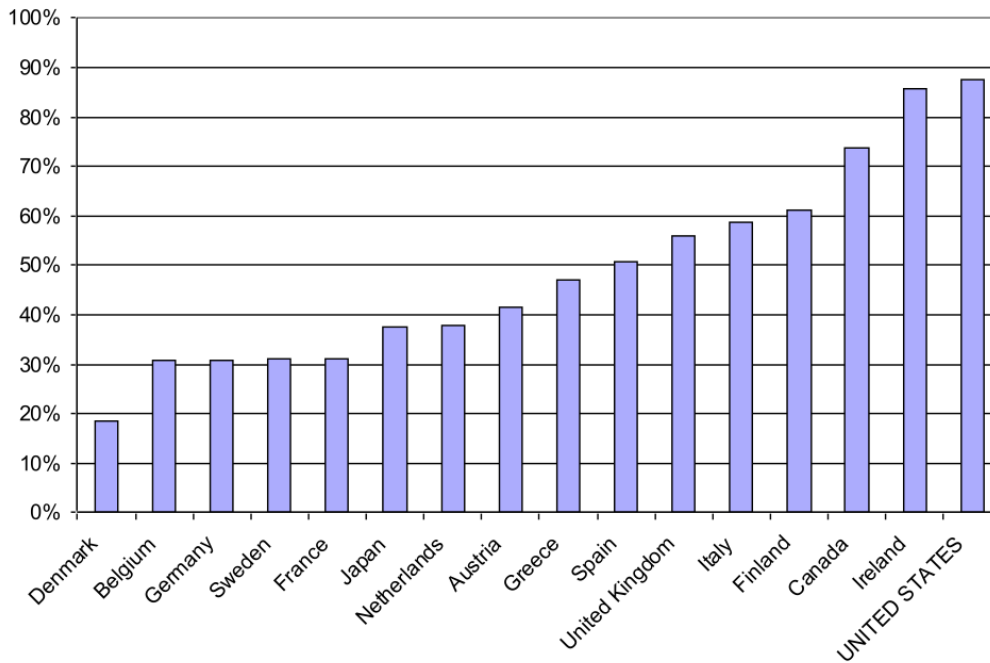
We collected data on at six indicators of religiosity: reported belief in God (Figure 12), in Heaven (Figure 13), and in Hell (Figure 14), the percentage of respondents for whom religion is “very important” in their lives (Figure 15), the percentage reporting moments of prayer or meditation (Figure 16), and the percentage who attend church at least weekly (Figure 17). On many of these measures, the United States is clearly an outlier: Figure 14 shows a 20-point between the United States and the next-most-believing country in terms of belief in Hell; Figure 15 shows a 20-point gap in percentage agreeing that Religion is very important in their lives. The United States comes in just behind Ireland in terms of the percentage reporting a belief in God (Figure 12), but on every other question, the United States is the most religious.

Figure 12: Belief in God



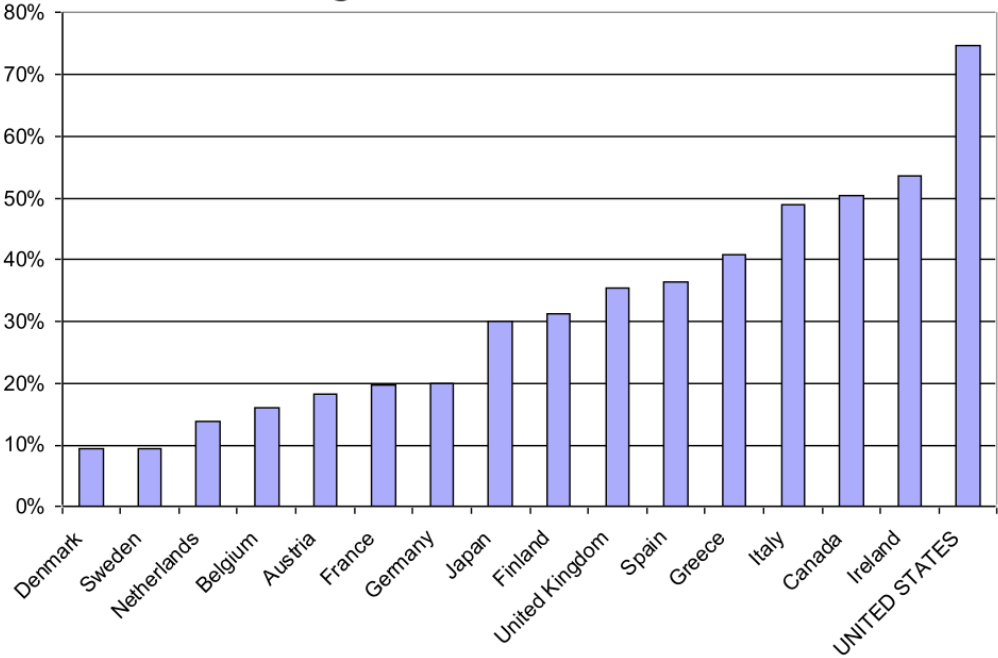
Source: World Values Survey, 1999

Figure 13: Belief in Heaven



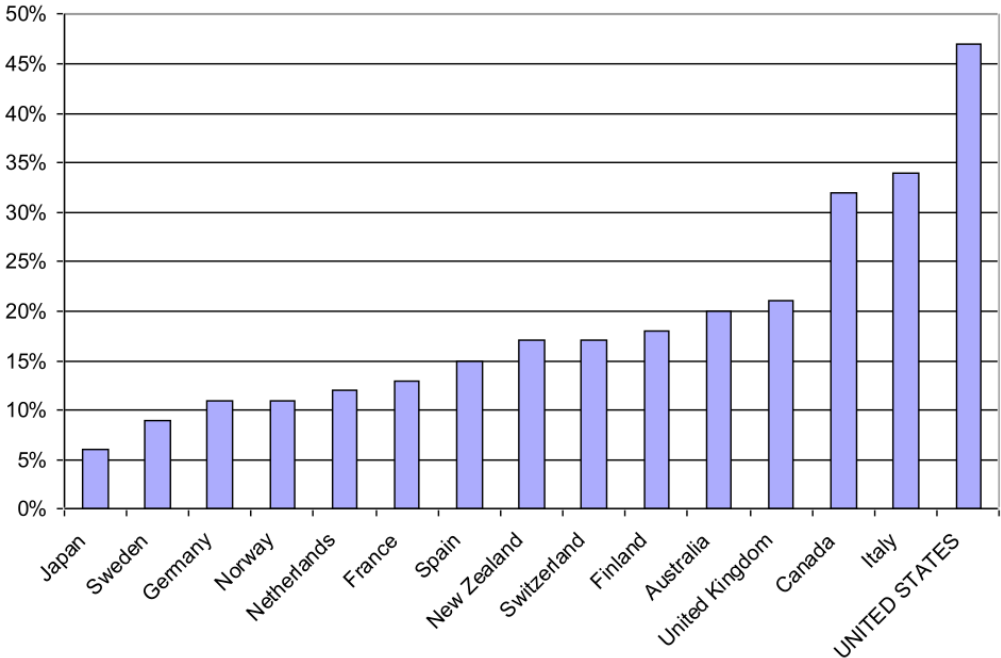
Source: World Values Survey, 1999

Figure 14: Belief in Hell



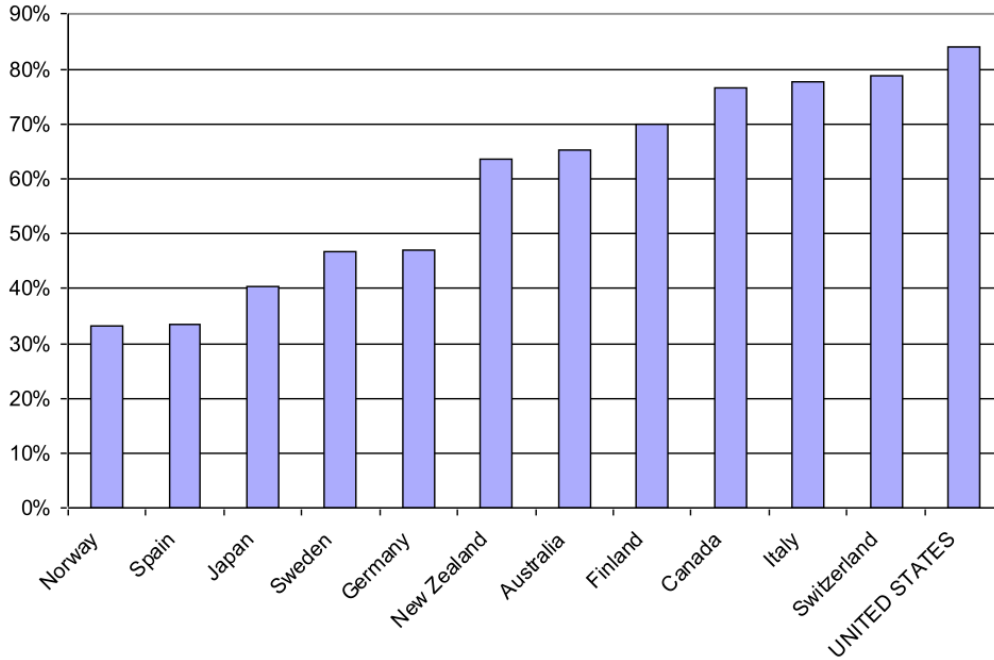
Source: World Values Survey, 1999

Figure 15: Religion is Very Important in My Life



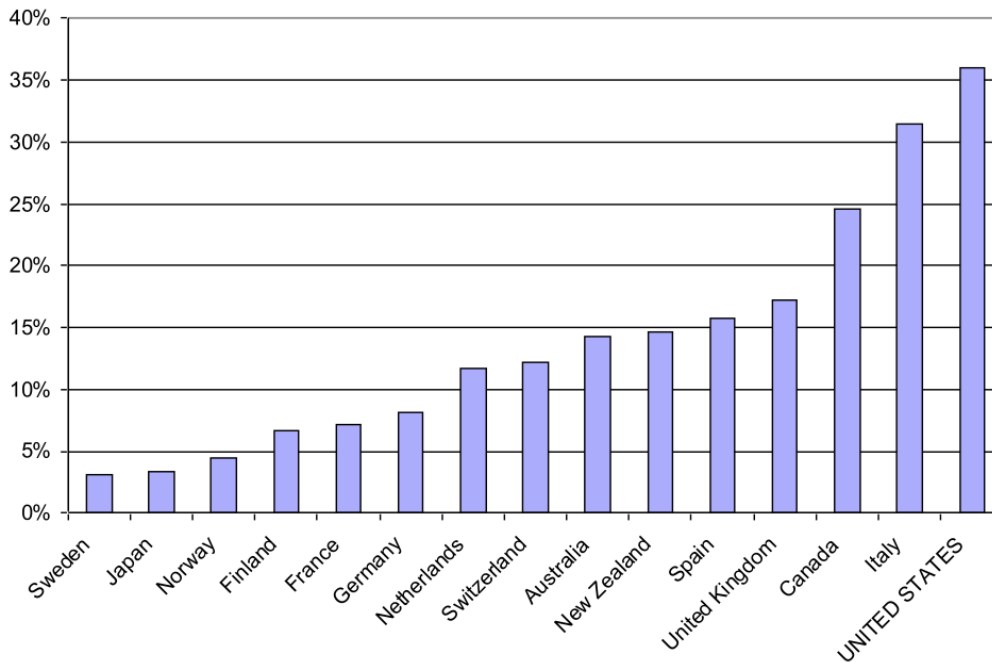
Source: World Values Survey, 2006

Figure 16: Moments of Prayer or Meditation



Source: World Values Survey, 2006

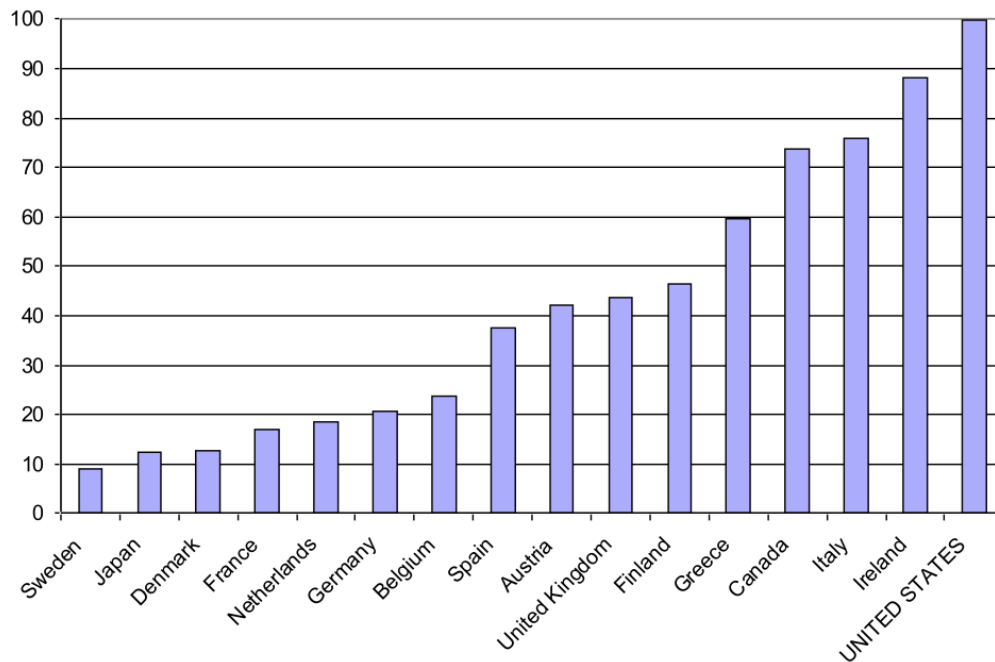
Figure 17: Attend Church Weekly (Or More Often)



Source: World Values Survey, 2006

Religiosity Index

Figure 18: Religiosity Index



Average of 6 indicators, standardized to range from 0 - 100.
Only countries with 4 or more indicators included.

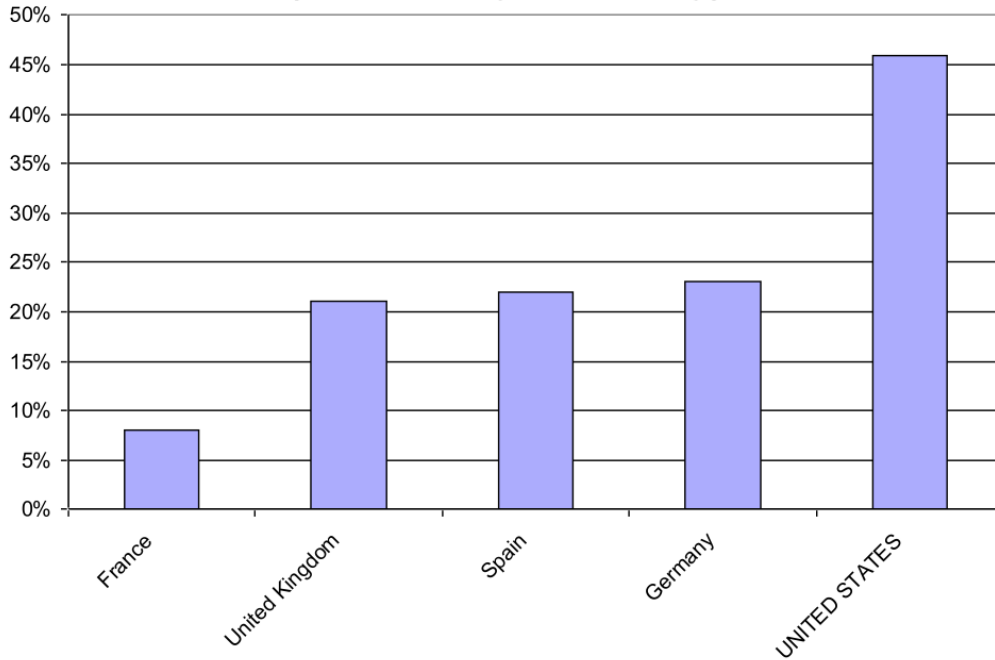
To summarize these relations, we devised a Religiosity Index (Figure 18), constructed in the same way as the Left-Right Values Index discussed above. The United States is clearly the country with the highest levels of religiosity by a considerable margin³. Aside from the position of the United States at the extreme, religion otherwise groups countries into different clusters than measures of left-right attitudes or belief in meritocracy; here, the United States is closest to two majority-Catholic countries, and farther from the United Kingdom than it falls on many measures. And it is not just Europe that is substantially less religious than the United States; Canada is noticeably lower on the index, and Japan is near the bottom⁴. Although this is not a surprising finding, neither is it a trivial one. If you believe the cosmos is a place of eternal life and eternal damnation, as opposed to the view that life is precious, but of limited duration, the

³ The United States' score on this index is not quite 100: although the difference is indistinguishable on the figure above the actual number is 99.96, reflecting the fact that the United States had only the second-highest score on one item in the index.

⁴ Australia is not included in the Religiosity Index because we only had data for three of the six indicators; if it were included it would fall roughly in the middle of the distribution.

world looks profoundly different to you; that your temporal outlook would also be different follows logically.

**Figure 19: Consider Myself “Christian” First
(Ahead of My Nationality)**



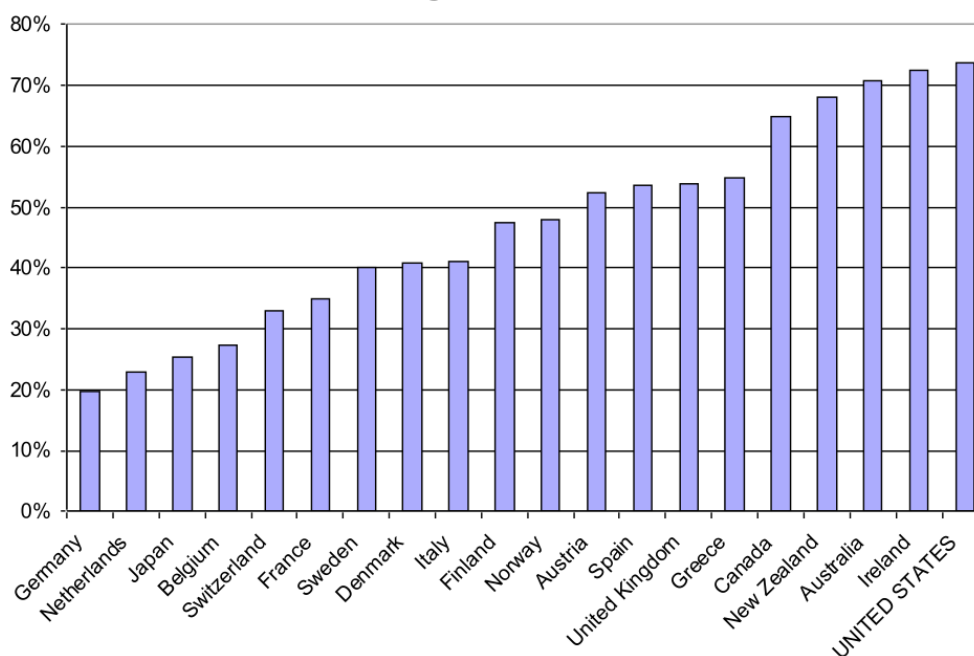
Source: Pew Global Attitudes Project, 2011

Figure 19 reinforces the picture of the United States as an outlier in terms of the religious fervor found amongst its citizens. This is apparently a long-standing pattern; drawing on observations from his travels in the United States in the early 1830s, Tocqueville proclaimed that “there is no country in the whole world in which the Christian religion retains a greater influence over the souls of men than in America” (1969: 308). Among those Americans who consider themselves Christians, nearly half feel that their Christianity takes precedence over their national identity; twice as many as in the next-highest country, Germany. This is especially telling in light of the unusually high level of national pride found in the United States, discussed below.

Patriotism

Lipset (1996) and Bowman (2009), among others, claim that Americans are more patriotic than people in other countries, this is confirmed in Figure 20, which shows the average percentage of people reporting that they are "very proud" to be of their country (American, British, French, etc.) across the 5 waves of the WVS for each wave for which that country had data⁵. The United States indeed has the highest percentages of "very proud" nationals over 25 years. Table X, in the Appendix, shows the values for each country for each wave; the United States is the most patriotic, or second only to Ireland, in every wave until 2006.

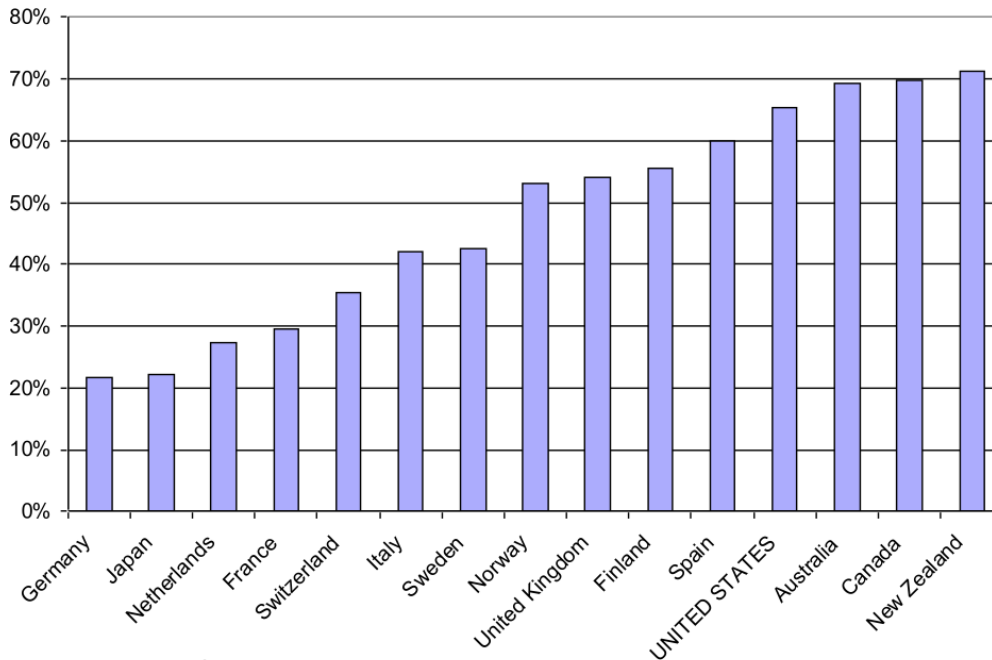
**Figure 20: Very Proud to be [Nationality]
Average 1981 - 2006**



Source: World Values Survey 1981-2006

⁵ In other words, if a country skipped this question on two waves, their value is the average across the three waves for which they did answer it

**Figure 21: Very Proud to be [Nationality]
2006**



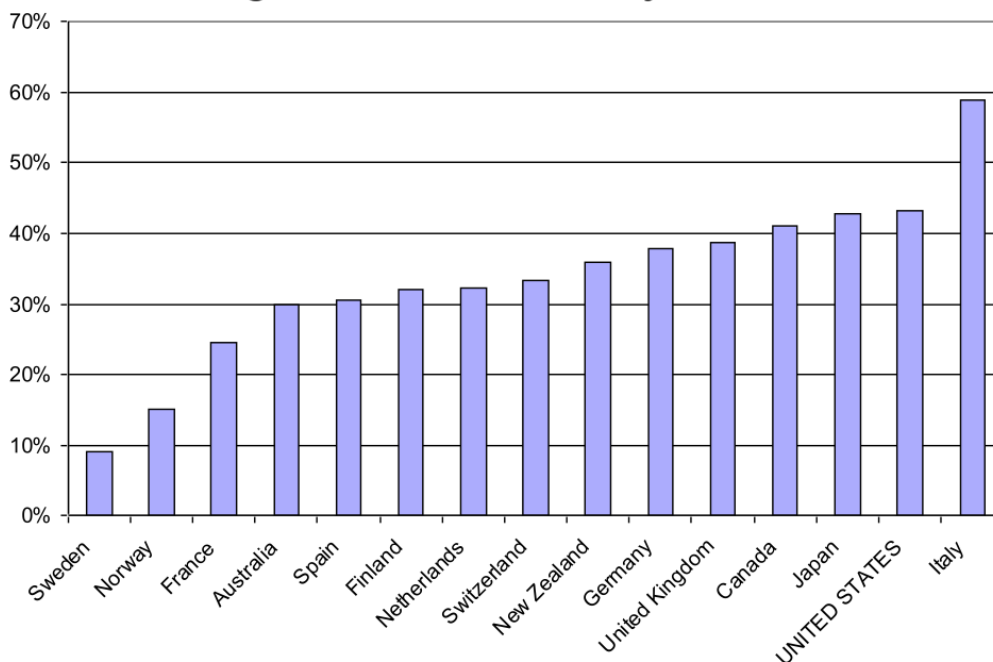
Source: World Values Survey, 2006

However, the World Values Survey data from 2006 (Figure 21) showed that the United States ranked 4th in pride in country, after Australia, Canada, and New Zealand. We suspect this may reflect a temporary dip, related to the Iraq War, in American levels of patriotism rather than a persistent pattern, though have not found recent data to determine whether the United States' relative patriotism has increased to pre-2001 levels. In both figures, however, the four English-speaking countries that originated as British colonies are in the top four places.

Cultural Conservatism

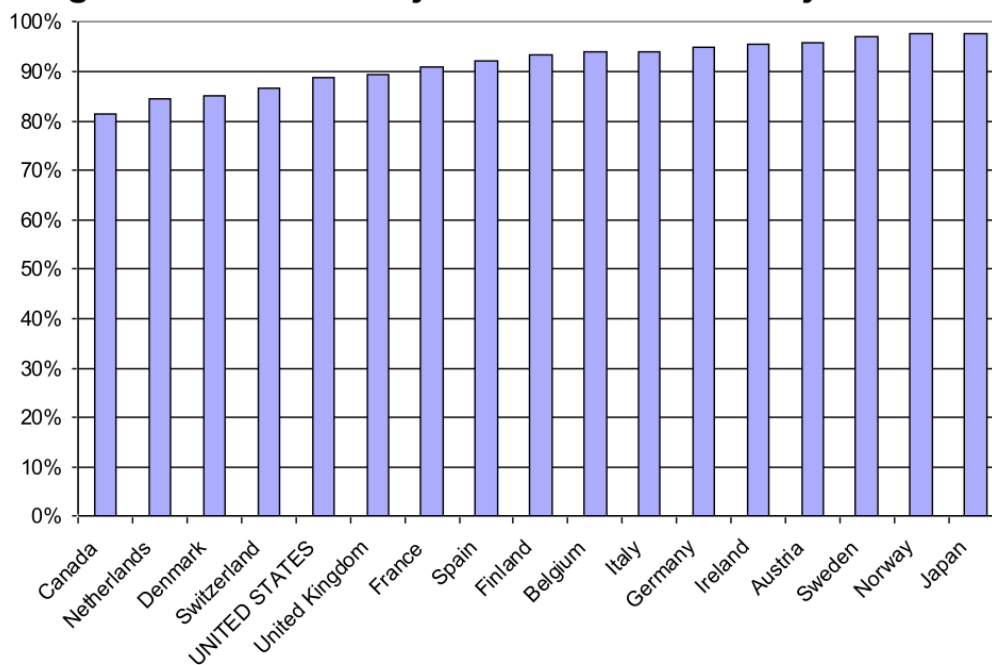
It might be suspected that because the United States is the most religious country in our study, it is also the most conservative on cultural or moral issues. Figures 22 through 26 show attitudes towards abortion, drug use, homosexuality, divorce, and adultery. All questions were part of the same series of World Values Survey items, and all ask whether the behavior (or identity, in the case of "homosexuality") "can always be justified, never be justified, or something in between," using a 1 - 10 scale in which 1 is "never justifiable" and 10 is "always justifiable." Each figure shows the percentage choosing 1 through 4 on each item. Here, the United States is clearly not the most culturally and socially conservative country; we are second, but far below Italy, in opposition to abortion (Figure 22), homosexuality (Figure 24), and divorce (Figure 25). Interestingly the United States is one of the more accepting countries when asked about use of marijuana and hashish (Figure 23). But perhaps reflecting our Puritanical origins, Americans are the least accepting of extra-marital affairs (Figure 26).

Figure 22: Abortion is Unjustifiable



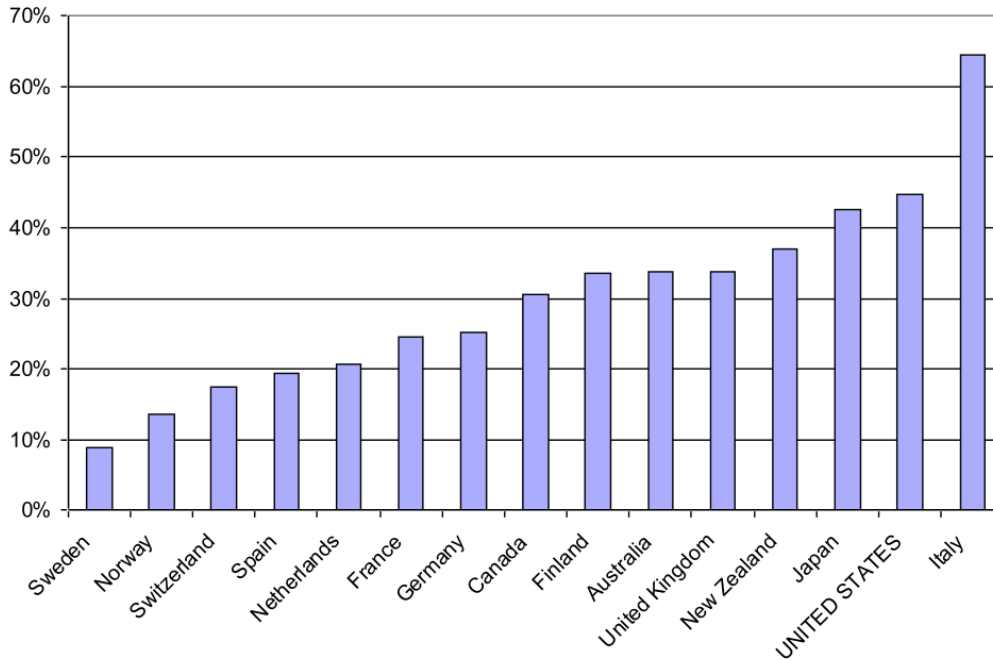
Source: World Values Survey, 2006

Figure 23: Use of Marijuana or Hashish Is Unjustifiable



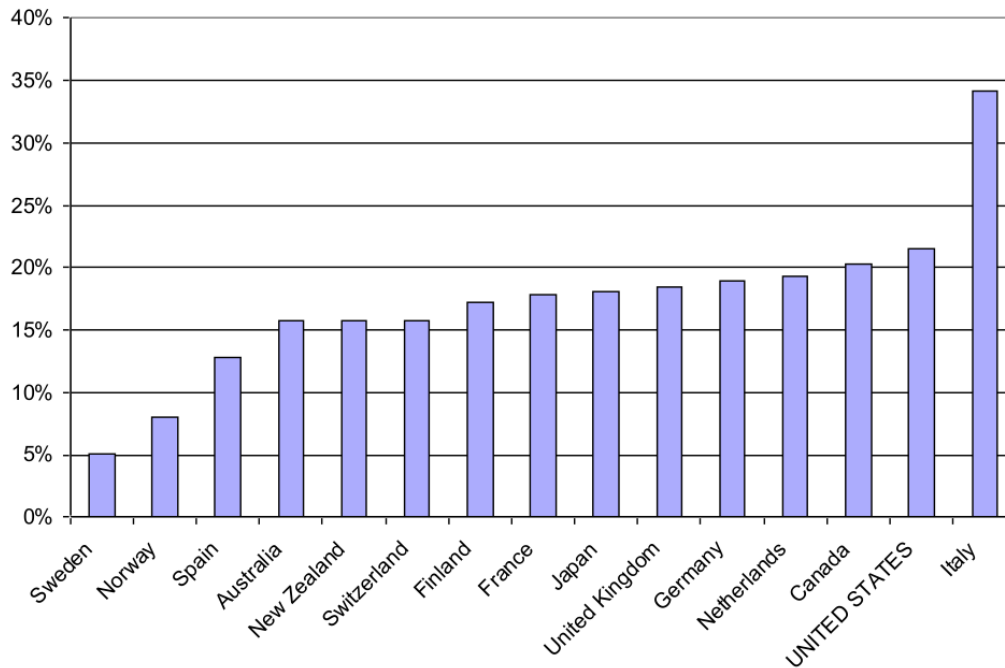
Source: World Values Survey, 1990

Figure 24: Homosexuality is Unjustifiable



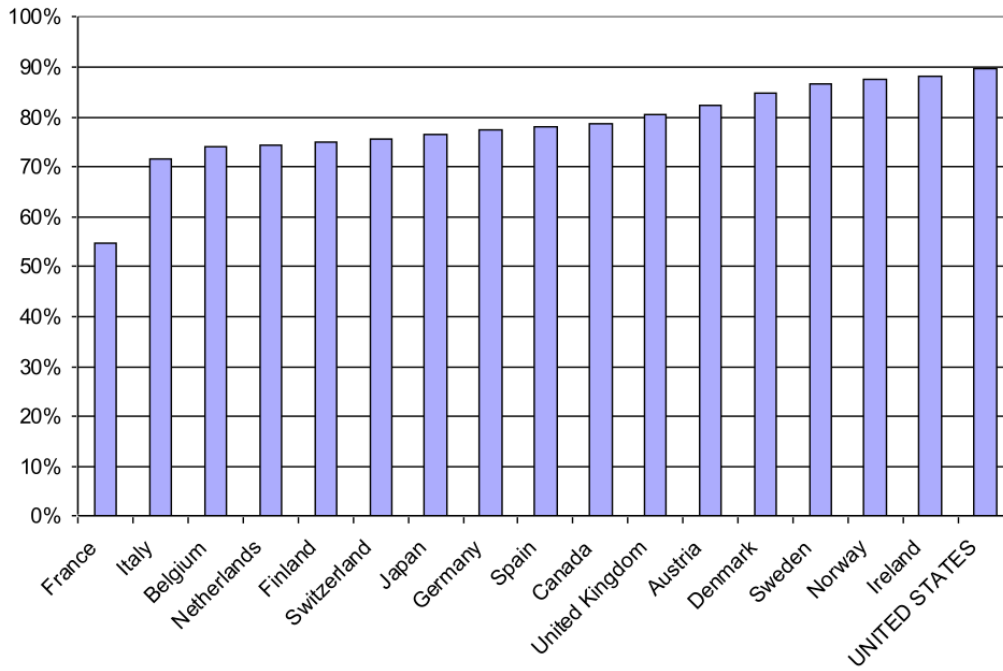
Source: World Values Survey, 2006

Figure 25: Divorce Is Unjustifiable



Source: World Values Survey, 2006

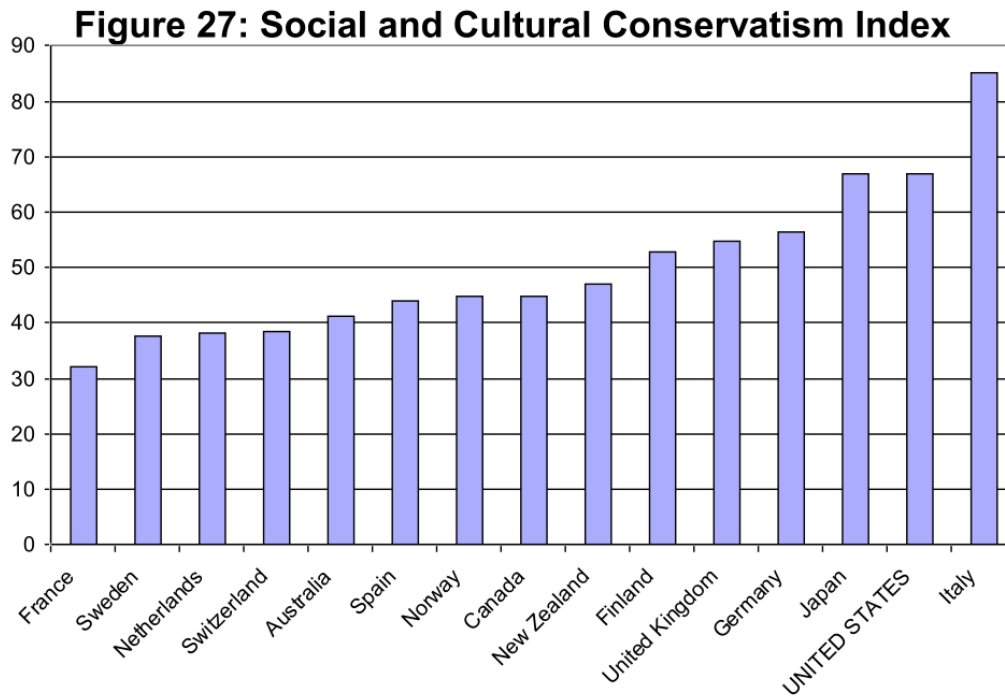
Figure 26: Extra-Marital Affairs are Unjustifiable



Source: World Values Survey, 1990

Social and Cultural Conservatism Index

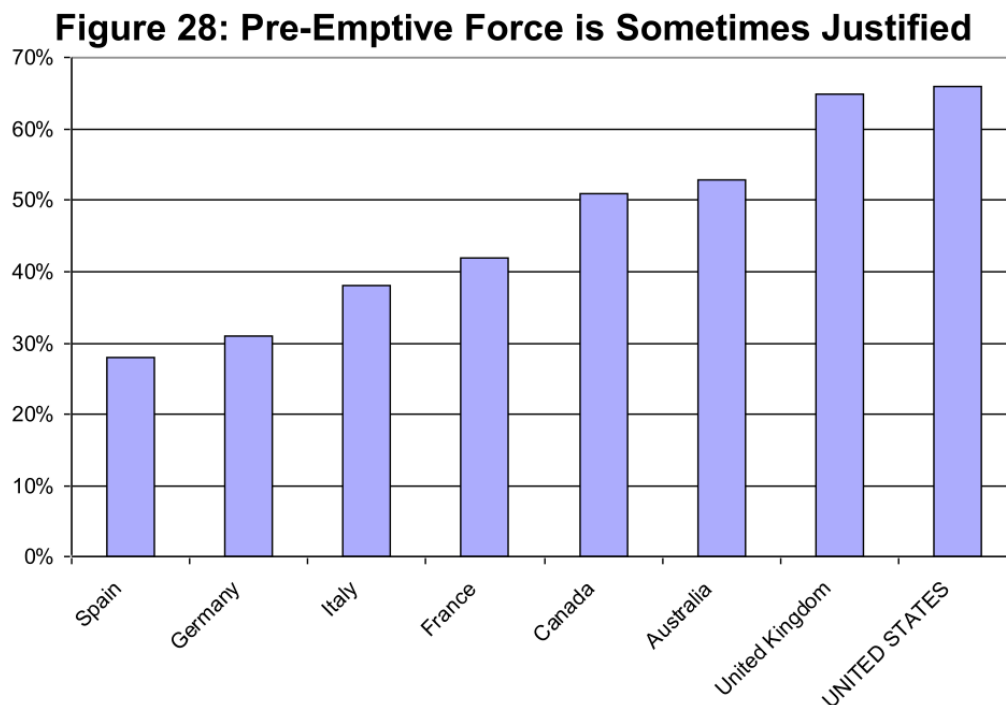
The Cultural & Social Conservatism Index was constructed the same way as the Left-Right Values Index and the Religiosity Index; here (Figure 27) Italy is clearly the most conservative country, with the United States and Japan close together at 2nd and 3rd, and the remaining countries clearly less traditional in their values. France and Sweden are true to their reputations and have the most liberal attitudes on social/cultural issues; the United States is not the most conservative on these issues, despite being the most religious by the measures included in the Religiosity Index.



Average of 5 indicators, standardized to range from 0-100.

Militarism

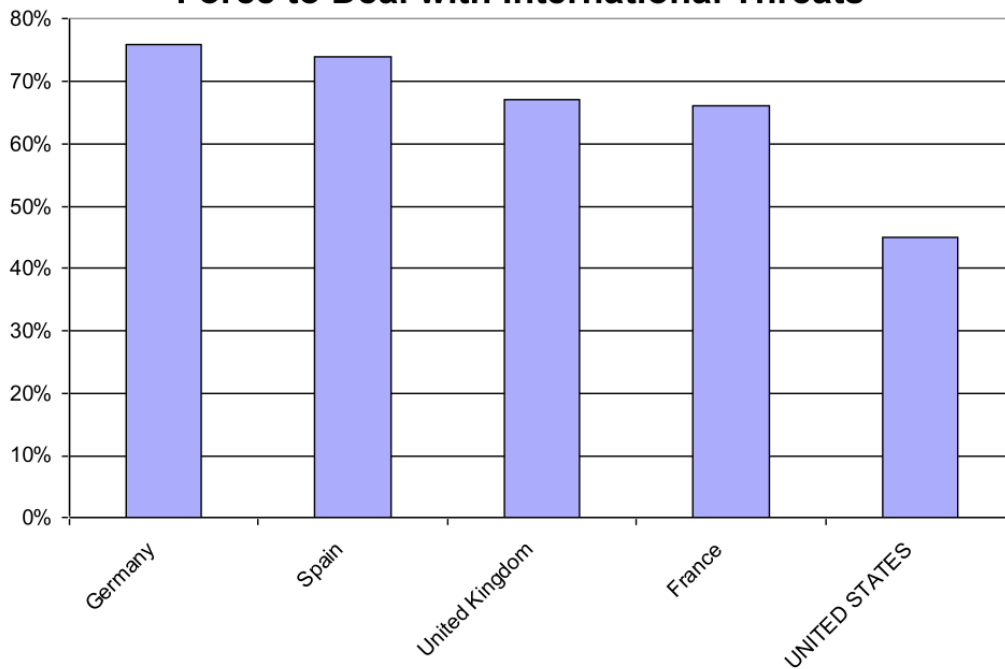
As the world's sole superpower, the United States has an unequalled number of military bases outside its borders, and a number of analysts have claimed that its foreign policy is deeply militaristic (see, for example Johnson, 2006). Are the attitudes of Americans in fact unusually militaristic? We tested that claim with three indicators of militaristic/pro-war attitudes, all from Pew. These measures are restricted to only a subset of no more than eight of our project countries; however, the countries in the Pew data are some of the largest in terms of population and economy, and represent a range of positions on our other indices, indicating this should still be a good comparison set for the United States. Figure 28 shows that the United States has the highest level of support for the use of pre-emptive force (defined as "using military force against countries that may seriously threaten our country, but have not attacked us"), though the United Kingdom is close behind.



Source: Pew Global Attitudes Project, 2003

Figure 29 shows that the United States also has by far the lowest levels of agreement with the proposition that countries should gain UN approval before using force in international conflicts; it is the only country included with less than a majority favoring UN approval.

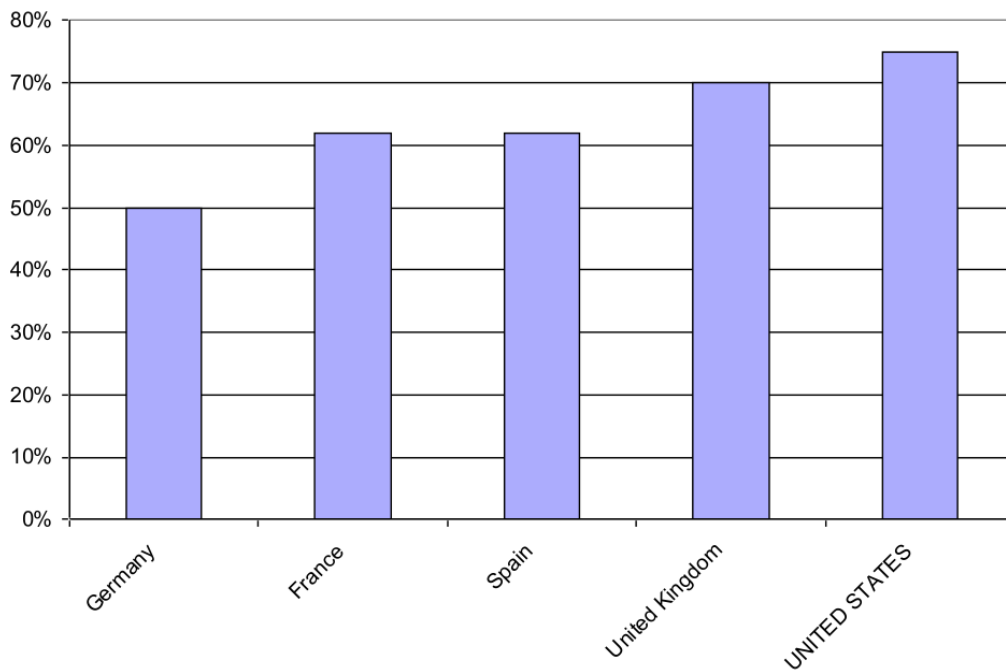
Figure 29: Should Have UN Approval Before Using Military Force to Deal with International Threats



Source: Pew Global Attitudes Project, 2011

Figure 30 shows that the United States also has the highest levels of agreement with the proposition that it is sometimes necessary to use military force to maintain order in the world. Both Figures 29 and 30 find Germany at the opposite end of the spectrum from the United States in terms of the use of force, with their greater caution perhaps a result of their experience in World War II.

Figure 30: It is Sometimes Necessary to Use Military Force to Maintain Order in the World

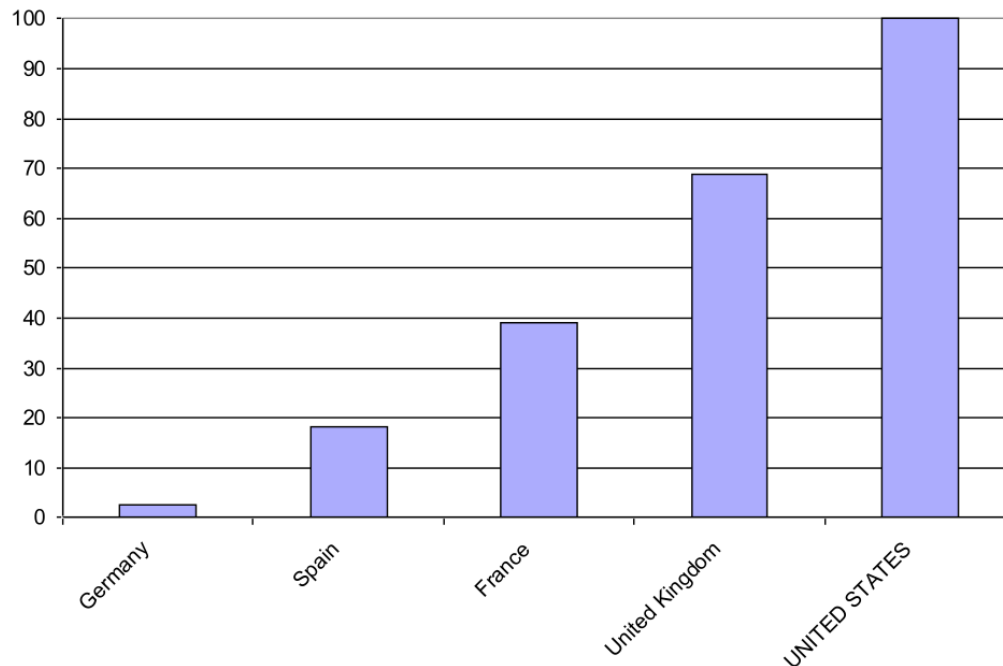


Source: Pew Global Attitudes Project, 2011

Militarism Index

The Militarism Index, like the other indices, was created based on standardizing the scores on the included items; only the five countries with data for all three indicators were included⁶. Because the United States has the highest levels of militarism on all three indicators, it has a score of 100 on the militarism index (Figure 31). There is a clear relationship visible between these five countries' average national opinions about the use of force and their actual potential for using military force. France, the United Kingdom and the United States all have large militaries and military budgets, both in absolute terms and relative to GDP; they all have military bases in other countries; they all have nuclear weapons; and they are all permanent members of the UN Security Council.

Figure 31: Militarism Index



Average of 3 Militarism indicators, standardized to range from 0 - 100.
(UN Approval reverse-coded)

⁶ UN-approval was reverse-coded so that disagreeing with getting UN approval gets a higher score than agreeing that it should be required.

Conclusion

In light of the empirical evidence we have presented in this paper, where then does the claim that American political values are distinctive stand? The short answer is that the argument that the prevailing political values of the United States are different – and, overall, more conservative – than political values in other wealthy democratic countries is generally upheld.

Yet while American politics remains distinctive, the United States is not always an outlier. To be sure, the United States ranked as the most conservative country on three of the four indices: left-right, religiosity, and militarism. But it is only on a few specific items that the United States truly stands apart from other countries: most notably, in whether a nation should have UN approval before using military force and in the frequency with which its citizens consider their Christian identity more important than their national identity.

Nonetheless, the clear confirmation of what might be called the Kingdom thesis – that the political center of gravity in the United States is to the right of that of other countries – is of special significance (Kingdon 1999). In particular, it sheds light on contemporary American politics, where one of the two main political parties now adheres to a fiercely anti-government and free market ideology. It is hard to imagine that the debate on health reform in 2009-2010 – one that excluded single-payer plans from respectable discussion and one that never seriously entertained policy proposals that would have covered 100 percent of the population – could have occurred in any other country. Deep forces embedded in the institutional structure of American medicine and

American politics undoubtedly shaped and constrained the outcome of the debate about health care. But so, too, did the distinctive political values of the American people⁷.

On the issue of American values compared to those of other wealthy democratic countries, there is more research to be done. Proponents of the view that American values remain distinctive have argued forcefully that Americans are more optimistic than people in other countries (Lipset, 1996; Ladd, 1995). We found no good contemporary data to test this hypothesis, but we did find one intriguing piece of evidence. In 2003, Gallup asked a representative sample of Americans whether they expected to get rich. Among all Americans, about one-third expected that they would one day become rich; among 18 to 29 year-olds, the figure was an astonishing 51 percent (Figure 32). While we have not been able to locate comparable data on other countries, we would be surprised if the population of any other nation was so optimistic about its prospects of becoming wealthy.

⁷ For illuminating studies on the politics of healthcare reform in the United States, see Starr (2011) and Jacobs and Skocpol (2010).

Figure 32: Americans Expect to Get Rich

Source: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/7981/Half-Young-People-Expect-Strike-Rich.aspx> (2003)

Writing more than 175 years ago, Alexis de Tocqueville wrote in *Democracy in America*: “In no other country in the world is the love of property keener or more alert than in the United States, and nowhere else does the majority display less inclination toward doctrines which in any way threaten the way property is owned” (Tocqueville, 1969:639). Judging from our results, what was true then in all likelihood remains true today.

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