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American politics

## Democracy in America

### How exceptional is America, really?

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IN AN unjustly overlooked series of posts on the unjustly neglected [Pileus blog](#) (<http://pileusblog.wordpress.com/>), Jason Sorens, a professor of political science at the University at Buffalo, casts a sceptical eye on the common assumption that the United States is an unusual or "exceptional" country. According to Mr Sorens, America is not exceptionally free, American government is not exceptionally small, and that American inequality is not exceptionally high.

Americans take pride in standing as the beacon of freedom unto the world. And America is pretty free. However, [as Mr Sorens observes](#) (<http://pileusblog.wordpress.com/2010/10/06/american-exceptionalisms-right-and-left/>), its beacon is not exceptionally bright. America comes in sixth in the Fraser Institute's 2010 ["Economic Freedom of the World"](#)



(<http://www.freetheworld.com/2010/reports/world/EFW2010-ch1-ch2.pdf>) rankings, between Chile and Canada. Mr Sorens

doesn't mention it, but matters look worse if we look at the Heritage Foundation and *Wall Street Journal's* ["2011 Index of Economic Freedom"](#) (<http://www.heritage.org/Index/topten>), which ranks America ninth, just behind Denmark and well behind our frostbitten northern neighbours. It's worse if we move on to non-economic liberties. Mr Sorens reports that America rates merely average on [Amnesty International's government repression index](#)

(<http://www.politicalterroryscale.org/countries.php?region=NorthAmerica&country=United%20States>) in the period from 2004-2008. One might come to the defence of the city on the hill by noting that America gets [top marks in political rights and civil liberties](#)

(<http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=22&year=2010&country=7944>) from

Freedom House, but then so do [scores of other countries](#)

(<http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=546&year=2010>). The Freedom House ratings aren't very fine-grained. If you think the extent of liberty is not unrelated to the rule of law, you may be interested in America's place in [Transparency International's latest corruption perceptions index](#)

([http://www.transparency.org/policy\\_research/surveys\\_indices/cpi/2010/results](http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi/2010/results)). It's 22nd, which isn't *bad*—better than France!—but not what you'd call exceptional.

In the second post (<http://pileusblog.wordpress.com/2010/10/25/american-exceptionalism-reconsidered-pt-2-the-size-of-the-state/>) of his series, Mr Sorens looks at the size of the American state, and finds a strong claim to exceptionalism. American government really is exceptionally small. But does America's relatively small government mean there is something in the American character and culture that especially prizes it? To answer this question, Mr Sorens examines a number of variables associated with government spending as a percentage of GDP. If

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it turns out that the size of America's government is smaller than would be predicted by the model, it is reasonable to conjecture that the "unexplained variance" is due to a cultural preference for smaller government. After running the numbers, Mr Sorens finds that

*If anything, the U.S. has a slightly bigger government than average, once you control for its economic, religious, and institutional profile. The really parsimonious citizens (on government consumption) are apparently found in Hungary, Ireland, Switzerland, and Japan, while the least egalitarian peoples (on social spending) are Japanese, Slovaks, Icelanders, and Norwegians.*

*In summary, there is very little evidence that Americans favor smaller government than Europeans and that that is the reason the American state is small—or if there is some small-government tendency among Americans, it is captured fully by their religious diversity. (Not religiosity, mind. I tested that—no effect.) More religiously diverse countries typically accommodated religious minorities early on or even disestablished their state religions; thus, they have some history of liberalism in this sphere, and that history may account for some of the results found. If the U.S. had French institutions, we'd have something close to their government too.*

This is a bit tricky. Mr Sorens is not saying that America does not have an exceptionally small government when compared to similar countries. It does. He's saying that American exceptionalism in this domain is accounted for not by distinctively American small-government norms, but instead by the long-term effect of a high level of religious diversity on America's institutions. If an evil demon pushed a button that instantly reorganised American institutions along French lines, there is nothing about Americans that would keep them from demanding French levels of government spending. I'm not sure this quite follows. Of course, if a country is exceptional in some respect, there's going to be a reason for it. Mr Sorens' argument seems to suggest that in accounting for our exceptionalism, we are likely to make a culture-wide version of the [fundamental attribution error](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fundamental%20attribution%20error)—to assume that our country's proud peculiarity flows from something special about us, as a people, as opposed to a unique external feature of our history that we had nothing to do with, and can't take credit for. But, as Mr Sorens acknowledges, the pathway from religious diversity to small government may be at least partly cultural. In that case, Americans, bearing the imprint of their unique history, might demand less than French levels of government spending even in an institutionally French counterfactual America. Still, Mr Sorens' finding takes some air out of puffed-up exceptionalism.

The dark side of American exceptionalism is America's allegedly exceptionally high levels of economic inequality. In [the final post of his series](http://pileusblog.wordpress.com/2011/02/08/american-exceptionalism-reconsidered-pt-3-inequality/), Mr Sorens' argues that America should not be compared to similarly wealthy European countries, but instead to countries with a similar history of slavery and the subjugation of natives.

*The U.S. has the least inequality, by a fair margin, of these [formerly slaveholding] countries. Of course, the U.S. also has a smaller combined percentage of blacks and Amerindians than all of these other countries except Costa Rica, Chile, Argentina, and Uruguay. But that's precisely the point—the [overriding factor determining inequality](http://muse.jhu.edu/login?uri=/journals/economia/v003/3.1engerman.html) in New World countries is the white or mestizo percentage of the population. When you control for that, the U.S. actually has very low inequality.*

*If the U.S. is exceptional at all, it is exceptional for its high GDP per capita and low income inequality, relative to similarly situated countries.*

Perhaps American pundits should devote more columns to explaining why it is that America, despite its baleful history of slavery, has managed to keep inequality so low. In addition to the purely demographic factors Mr Soren's points out, my first guess would be that the United States, unlike most other countries in the New World, made it over the hump of [the Kuznets curve](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kuznets%20curve) (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kuznets%20curve>).

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