Is our country unique? That question is difficult for the citizens of any nation to think about objectively. As a matter of common observation, every nation is different, just as every culture and individual is. And it is a simple truism that a proud citizen of any society is likely to think that his home is special. “I believe in American exceptionalism,” President Obama famously said in a 2009 press conference, “just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism.”

But most champions of American exceptionalism make a different claim about America than Obama did: It is more exceptional than other Western democracies in the sense that it is more of an outlier along more important dimensions of national life. This fact, of course, does not necessarily mean that it is better. But some object to even descriptive claims of American exceptionalism—and for understandable reasons: Such claims seem to carry more than a whiff of the sense of superiority that I have just disclaimed but that many critics of American national pride are keen to debunk. The U.S., they point out, is now in decline in areas that we once dominated, such as public education, public health, voter participation—and even some sports! Other nations have indeed caught up with or exceeded some of our achievements, and more may do so in the future. Some disparage our global pre-eminence, past or current, by rooting it in violence and treachery rather than in anything unique and admirable in our character, culture, or achievements. Our vaunted standard of living, they maintain, is not rising as fast as it once

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did, and in any event it was built on the backs of the poor; our attainments pale before our gross social inequalities. Slavery, Indian removal, racism, and nativism, among other excrescences, blight our history. Vulgarity is a trademark of our popular culture, and white working-class Americans are dying earlier.

But do these critiques provide an adequate and accurate account of American exceptionalism? In 2008, I had the honor of exploring this question with James Q. Wilson, one of the greatest students of American society. A scholar of everything from urban politics to crime and law enforcement, bureaucracy, regulation, drug policy, the role of intellectuals in public life, equality and elitism, the state of the family, moral reasoning, and human nature, Wilson (who died in 2012) combined an empiricism of small but telling details with an eye for deep distinctions and trends. So when we determined to compile a reader on what made America exceptional, we quickly decided on a distinctly “Wilsonian” approach to the subject.

Instead of discussing exceptionalism on the high level of generality at which it is usually addressed, we asked some of America’s leading social scientists (plus a keen observer from abroad) to analyze as many important aspects of our national life as would fit in a single volume. Using the most solid empirical evidence, each author analyzed in detail a single area of public policy, institutional structure, or culture. Where possible, they discussed how the U.S. compares with other wealthy democracies. The resulting book, *Understanding America: The Anatomy of an Exceptional Nation*, was published in 2008, and was one of Wilson’s final projects. It offers both a source of insight into what is and is not distinctive or unique about America and an example of how to think about a complex question about which objective analysis is difficult—partly because only experts tend to have the necessary comparative expertise and partly because we are often too immersed in our own system to see its deep structures. Key to the methodology, as to Wilson’s decades of scholarship, was an insistent empiricism. Although America’s principles and premises are vital to a nation midwifed by a liberal, Enlightenment-inspired Constitution, we focused our authors on America’s institutions, political and policy choices, and culture. That is how James Q. Wilson taught generations of students and readers to understand America.

Eight years after the publication of *Understanding America*, and four years after Wilson’s death, the question of American exceptionalism
is even more pertinent and perplexing than ever, as we and our liberal democratic allies go our separate ways in so many areas. Answers provided by a Wilsonian approach can teach us a great deal about our country and how to shape its future.

What follows is a kind of summary of one of Wilson’s final reflections on American life, building on the research of some of the students and colleagues he most admired. This essay cannot examine every one of the book’s chapters, but seeks to present most of its key findings as they bear on exceptionalism. It also reveals Wilson’s methodology in analyzing large, complex questions of this kind, drawing on those whose mastery of the facts in diverse areas of American life can help guide us to an understanding of our elusive, sometimes unwelcome exceptionalism.

**O UR E XCE P T I O N A L P O L I T I C S**

The American political system is perhaps the most obvious institutional way in which the United States stands apart from the rest of the developed world. This is probably what most people think of when considering American exceptionalism.

The U.S. Constitution is not only the oldest constitution among major developed countries, it is also the most terse and has been amended very infrequently—the first ten times with the Bill of Rights in 1791 almost immediately after ratification, and then only 17 more times in the subsequent 225 years. Although a model for many democratic constitutions during the 18th, 19th, and part of the 20th centuries, it is now something of an outlier, aped by relatively few countries.

Our political system self-consciously rejected other constitutional arrangements; it is, in this way, exceptional by design. As political scientist Nelson Polsby noted in *Understanding America*, the Framers sought “emphatically not a presidential system, where the chief executive rules more or less alone; nor was it a parliamentary system where the ‘government’ arises via party organization from a relatively passive legislature. Rather, they created a system in which president and Congress, as separate entities, must cooperate in the making of laws and in practice actively compete in exercising influence over the subordinate agencies of the permanent government.”

In this competition, Congress’s numerous controls, both formal and informal, over an administration’s policy and implementation make it unquestionably the most powerful legislature in the world, at least with
respect to domestic policy. Its powers over foreign policy, although less formidable, are still extensive. The executive’s ability to check and balance Congress—mainly through the veto power, appointment of senior positions over the bureaucracy, discretion in how to interpret and implement laws, special presidential advantages in conducting foreign relations, and the ability as the sole nationally elected official to exert greater influence over public opinion—is considerable, to be sure. But in other democratic political systems, where the chief executive utterly dominates the parliament, such presidential checking powers are largely unnecessary.

Because Congress is so powerful compared not only with foreign legislatures but also with America’s other political institutions, its internal structure matters far more than it would in other systems. Polsby, perhaps the leading scholar on Congress in his time, noted that in other systems, the more numerous, more representative chamber is usually the most important by far, whereas the opposite is true in the U.S., where the smaller, more severely malapportioned Senate is first among equals.

Polsby also emphasized the remarkable complexity of our political system. One dimension of this complexity is the intricate, opaque interaction of separated powers, federalism, and judicial power. A second is the number, length, and cost of elections. As Jack Citrin noted in his chapter on our political culture: “Americans have more opportunities to vote than citizens of any other democracy. Staggered elections at set times; primary elections for nominating candidates; elections for judges, local administrators, and boards; and direct democracy at the state and local levels make for frequent trips to the polls to fill out truly long ballots.”

Partly for this reason, Citrin argued, Americans vote at much lower rates than the citizens of virtually every other democracy. (Other reasons for lower American turnout include the use of plurality voting rules, with its many “wasted” votes, rather than proportional representation, as well as differences in how turnout is calculated.)

A third contributor to political complexity is “the sheer size of the decision-making community in American government,” which Polsby illustrated with an “ambassador’s problem”:

An ambassador newly arrived in most of the world’s capital cities can, over a reasonable length of time, get to know virtually everybody who is instrumental to governmental decision making. Even
in the most advanced and civilized democratic nations, there is a
not-too-large group of parliamentarians and civil servants who, to
all intents and purposes, run the country. . . . In the United States,
that number is dauntingly large. . . . in part because policymaking
is not contained within the government, or even within the inter-
play between the two political branches of government, but spills
out into a great variety of intermediary organizations.

If America’s political system is exceptional, so is its political culture.
In his contribution to the volume, Citrin, like countless observers of
American life at least since Alexis de Tocqueville, marveled at the coun-
try’s uniquely liberal tradition. That tradition, Citrin argued, is manifest
in “the absence of a strong socialist party, the weakness of the labor
movement, the acceptance of economic inequality, and the limited de-
velopment of government programs in the area of welfare and health
care.” Also distinctively liberal is the robust civil society that dominates
more areas of social life in America than in any other country, perform-
ing numerous functions, including philanthropy (discussed below), that
elsewhere are mainly performed by government.

This is surely in part because Americans are far more individualistic
than Europeans. Even blacks and Hispanics, whose status in the indi-
vidualist social order tends to be lower, are more like white Americans
than Europeans in their optimism, emphasis on personal responsibility,
skepticism about government income guarantees, support for private
ownership of business, and belief that poverty is due more to lack of
individual motivation than to unfair treatment by society. “Consistent
with these attitudes,” Citrin found,

Americans pay lower taxes than most Europeans. America also
spends less on transfer payments such as pensions, unemployment
insurance benefits, family allowances, and child care than other
countries and is virtually the only wealthy democracy without
a government-supported universal health care system. Moreover,
the financing of Social Security and health care programs reflects
the commitment to personal responsibility: individuals and
their employers contribute to insurance funds. And unlike many
European countries, America restricts the access of even legal
immigrants to social services such as Medicare, with widespread
public support. This, too, fits the idea that people should contribute before they receive public benefits.

Citrin’s reference to our health-care system, of course, was written before the Affordable Care Act, but the design of that law actually reinforces his point: It is not universal but relies on sanctions to induce voluntary enrollment; it is largely administered by private insurers; and it is only partly government-supported. The book’s chapter on our health-care system, contributed by David Cutler and Patricia Keenan, identifies many other unique (some uniquely dysfunctional) aspects of that system.

Meaningful political power is also distributed between different levels of government, so that when it comes to domestic policy ours is a genuinely federal system. The United States is not alone, of course, in having an emphatically federal system in which some power is shared between the national government and sub-national units. But Martha Derthick, in her discussion of federalism in the book, contrasted America’s version both with Europe’s unitary states and with its federal states which, except for Switzerland, “tend to treat federalism as a form of decentralized unitary government rather than as a product of formerly separate sovereigns.” America’s federalism is comparable to Australia’s in some respects, and is in fact less decentralized than Canada’s system. But American federalism has several other exceptional features.

One is how it affects the party system. Polsby observed that a “significant reason that Americans make do with only two major political parties, unlike voters in other much smaller western European countries, who are accustomed to have what they perceive to be a far greater range of partisan choices, is because each of the two American major parties is in most respects a loose coalition of state parties.” These coalitions are all structured differently, and they produce “close to a one-hundred-party system.”

A second distinctive aspect of American federalism is the relative size of the national and sub-national governments. State and local governments, Derthick noted in 2008, employ vastly more people than the federal government does, and they still do today: State and local government payrolls stood at just under 19.1 million workers in 2013, compared with 2.7 million civilian federal workers, counting both part-time and full-time employees. California’s government—in terms of
employees, tax revenues, and other indices of size — is larger than those of most nations. Approximately 85% of federal employees work outside the Washington, D.C., area.

**Decentralized Policies**

American federalism accounts for the unique decentralization of some of our key policy sectors. Education and law enforcement are perhaps the two most important examples. Paul Peterson’s analysis of the educational system emphasizes that local control of the public schools extends not only to their administration but, even more important, to their being financed primarily through local property taxes. The latter produces great and unjust inequalities in per-pupil spending, inequalities that federal programs targeting low-income children alleviate only marginally. Although American public schools were once the envy of the world, they are now mediocre, despite the following facts: America’s parents are better educated, earn more, and devote more time to their children’s instruction; U.S. schools have far more financial resources per pupil (in constant dollars) than ever before; and the number of professionals per pupil within the school buildings has grown steadily so that classes in 2005 had, on average, 10 fewer students than they did in 1960. In sharp contrast is the comparative excellence of American institutions of higher education, particularly liberal-arts colleges and research universities — a sector dominated by private institutions to a far greater extent than anywhere else. (For-profit educational institutions are also far more common here than elsewhere.)

American law enforcement is also more decentralized than elsewhere, as Wilson noted in his own contribution to the volume:

> In Europe, the criminal justice system tends to be centralized, with national police forces and government ministries that oversee law enforcement. Though Great Britain has fifty-two police departments, America has at least seventeen thousand and maybe more.... In America, every city, county, and state has its own police department; every county and many cities have their own elected district or city attorney; and every state has its own correctional system.

The main consequence of this more decentralized law-enforcement system, Wilson argued, is that it is far more sensitive to public attitudes and
pressures about crime, which helps to explain our greater propensity for “tough on crime” measures, including capital punishment, high incarceration rates, long sentences, and other policies.

The U.S. has lower rates of most property crimes than many other democracies do, but a much higher murder rate. Indeed, Wilson observed, “the rate at which Americans kill each other without using guns by relying instead on fists, knives, and blows to the head is three times higher than the non-gun homicide rate in England.” The same difference in fatality rates exists between New York City and London even when the motive is a robbery and no gun is used. “To put it bluntly, Americans are a more violent people than are the British, though the latter have been trying hard to catch up.”

Jonathan Caulkins and Mark Kleiman, in their contribution to the volume, noted two other differences between the U.S. and European approaches to crime, both related to drugs. Although Americans use roughly equivalent amounts of drugs and probably less alcohol than citizens of comparable developed nations, they consume much more of one drug, cocaine, which is associated with high levels of crime and violence. And our criminal-justice system arrests and imprisons more drug offenders than European systems do (although this gap may narrow in the future). This is, again, in large part because law enforcement in America is far more answerable to local pressure and public opinion than it is in most other democracies.

Many of these distinctive features of American life are reflected in the management and the work of the government. The actual public bureaucracy, particularly at the federal level, is much smaller relative to the economy in America than in other liberal democracies. But at the same time, our system of administrative law delegates enormous power and discretion to federal agencies under political conditions that make it unusually difficult, especially when compared to European bureaucracies, for officials to establish the democratic legitimacy of their actions. Two of those conditions have already been mentioned: the separation of powers, which multiplies the sources of influence over the administrative system, and the fragmentation of decision-making, which leaves to state and local officials many of the most important public functions, including education, land-use regulation, criminal justice, transportation, tort law, occupational licensure, and much more.
At the same time, however, our federal bureaucracy is run to an exceptionally large extent by political appointees, who work to advance the cause of the elected president—and therefore tend to make the system more answerable to the public will but less independent and so in important ways less trusted. There are 3,000 politically appointed positions in the executive branch at the federal level; about half of those are senior officials—and these numbers have grown dramatically over time. This “layering” of political appointees over career bureaucrats contrasts sharply with many parliamentary governments where only the very top officials’ positions change hands with a new government. In Denmark, for example, there is only a single political appointee—the minister—above the career civil servants in most departments of government. In the U.K., career civil servants operate just below the ministers and a small number of aides. As Donald Kettl observed in his chapter in the volume, this layering produces serious problems of competence and continuity in American government:

One is that some appointees lack detailed knowledge and long-term experience in the agencies they are charged with managing. The second is that, by dipping several layers into the bureaucracy, the risk of conflicts with career administrators multiplies. Finally, many of these political appointees serve for relatively short periods of time—often just eighteen months or a little more.

Two other exceptional aspects of American bureaucracy are officials’ non-elite recruitment and training (compared, for example, with the U.K. and France), and the large extent to which the ordinary courts, which are constitutionally empowered to check the behavior of the other two branches and which afford easy access to those who want to challenge agency action, play a strong role in shaping administrative decisions.

In *Understanding America*, legal historian Lawrence Friedman identified a number of features of the legal system that distinguish ours from those in other developed democracies—including the dominant role of lawyers in American public and private life, a point emphasized by Tocqueville 180 years earlier. Americans’ deep-seated suspicion of government, together with a highly fragmented and decentralized legal order, assigns vast authority to federal and state courts to constrain the actions of both agencies and legislatures—and in a real sense, to make
law—through expansive judicial review. With the largest legal sector in the world (1.3 million lawyers in 2015 and growing faster than the overall population), it is also a system that is remarkably accessible to ordinary citizens and strongly oriented toward asserting and protecting individual rights at the expense of governmental and social claims.

More than in any other country, our legal system broadly protects expression of all kinds—not only political advocacy but speech-like behavior (like picketing and message-bearing clothing), commercial advertising, and defamatory, indecent, abusive, and outrageous utterances as well. And our legal culture is famously litigious and adversarial. As Friedman explains:

“Other countries may have as much law as the United States . . . but they have much less lawyering. They are also less rights-conscious. They give more power and discretion to administrative agencies, and they make it harder to challenge those agencies in court. The vast proliferation of jokes about American lawyers, a genre which simply does not exist elsewhere, ironically suggests the greater salience of lawyers in the United States. Only the United States feels it is in the grip of a litigation crisis.”

And it is not just the structure but also the core doctrines of our legal system that differ significantly from those of other nations, including those with common-law systems like ours. In the U.S., for example, far higher damage recoveries attract litigants from abroad if they can establish jurisdiction here, and U.S. public law is an outlier in rejecting proportionality as an explicit judicial methodology for rights adjudications (except in a few areas, including the First Amendment).

America’s public life—our political institutions and practices, political culture, and legal system—is thus unique in some important respects that both reflect and shape our national character.

As Robert Wuthnow explains in his contribution to the volume, Americans are also the most religious among large Western nations, although “researchers question whether religion here is quite as strong as such comparisons might suggest.” Our religious practices reflect many of the very same features that mark the U.S. as exceptional in the secular realm: market competition, individualism, ethnic and racial diversity, privatism, ideological division, localism, evangelical and moralizing
movements, global reach, and consumerism. Americans shop around for congregations, treating religion as a kind of consumption good. “American religion,” Wuthnow observes, “is big business.”

The sheer number and density of non-Western religions found here also set us apart. Much of this is due to immigration (although “attendance at worship services among foreign-born Americans is actually lower” than for the native-born). Religion’s effect on American politics is profound. More than in other liberal democracies, “[p]undits and politicians show an almost inexhaustible interest in what preachers may be saying about public issues. They wonder whether one political party or another is better at mobilizing its religious base, and whether the personal conduct of public officials violates religious teachings.”

HAVES AND HAVE-NOTS

Economic distinctiveness parallels our unique political system. In his contribution to Understanding America, Benjamin Friedman showed that the American economy is unlike those of other advanced democracies in achieving a sustained record of growth, job creation, technological innovation, capital investment, and a widespread distribution of ownership.

He attributed these achievements to a number of factors. First is the remarkable flexibility and competitiveness of American enterprises. Second, a relatively unregulated, highly mobile labor market imposes few constraints on firms, and that freedom rewards workers who can shift from dying industries to growing ones. And third, America is home to the world’s leading financial markets, which in turn depend on sound regulation and supervision of financial institutions.

The American regulatory environment, compared with its more intrusive foreign counterparts, encourages entrepreneurship, new business formation, and job growth. America’s comparative openness to immigration also contributes to these economic strengths, albeit by holding down low-skill wages somewhat. (Some critics believe that it also encourages recklessness and illegality.) Finally, a substantial share of American economic output is provided outside the for-profit market economy in the non-profit sector. The result of all this is a standard of living that has ranked at or near the world’s highest for decades, far out-ranking all other countries of major size and geopolitical importance.

Friedman explained the features of America’s economy that enable it to produce so much more per person than that of France, Germany, or Japan:
One fairly consistent part of the story...[is] simply that Americans work more. Of those who are of normal working age, more are employed in paying jobs than is true on average in the other G-7 countries, and those who hold jobs put in more time working. The productivity of American workers [is] also greater than that of workers in the other advanced economies, although less so than the simple difference in output would imply. One influence that helps make American workers more productive, even compared to those in Western Europe, is that they receive more schooling. On average Americans have nearly three more years of education than citizens of the other six G-7 countries. American workers also have the advantage of more capital with which to do their jobs. [which] well exceeds what workers in any of the other G-7 economies have.

For example, Friedman noted, America had accumulated more than twice as much information-technology capital per person than the average of the other G-7 economies. He went on to explain the institutional reasons why America’s economy exhibits these features more than other countries do. The American workplace operates under far fewer restrictions of the kind that make companies in Europe particularly reluctant to hire new workers. Labor unions are a far less influential force in the U.S. than in other countries: Only 14% of U.S. workers are covered by collective-bargaining agreements compared with more than half on average in the other G-7 countries, including more than 80% in Italy and more than 90% in France.

The income and other economic support that non-working citizens receive from government is also both less available and less generous in the U.S. than in most other advanced economies. Income earned from working is typically taxed at lower rates in America than in most other advanced countries. Americans’ intense work effort may also reflect deep cultural preferences. Finally, U.S. financial markets are larger, more diversified, more decentralized, more participatory, and thus operate more efficiently to raise capital than those elsewhere, and the American regulatory and monetary regimes reinforce these advantages. Such advantages, of course, do not obviate the significant challenges that the American economy faces. But they do help make America distinct—and likely explain why our recovery from the Great Recession has been more robust than those of other OECD countries.
Differences in taxation and labor policies are closely tied to differences in the nature of the safety net and social insurance, and these in turn reflect differences in the public’s tolerance for inequality. The United States is plainly an exception on these fronts. Measuring and comparing poverty and inequality in different countries is a difficult task, for many reasons explained by Gary Burtless and Ron Haskins in their contribution to *Understanding America*, but by most criteria the U.S. is much more unequal than other OECD countries. To cite one measure, almost 11% of Americans received a net income below 40% of the U.S. median income—much more than the average percentage in other rich countries. Nor did using a higher poverty threshold change the result much. Our low-income population received smaller incomes than the poor in nearly all the other industrial countries, and the rich received much higher incomes than the rich anywhere else. The U.S. also had a high proportion of children in single-parent families, where they are more likely to be poor than if they lived with two parents.

Much the same is true of intergenerational mobility: The U.S. has only moderate income and occupational mobility compared with other rich countries, although including in the mobility calculations the large income gains by immigrants from poorer countries would reduce this disparity. The native-born, however, do not enjoy exceptional opportunities for upward mobility compared with people born in other rich countries. Particularly for those at the bottom of the income distribution, the United States is less successful than other rich countries in equalizing opportunities for children.

And by international standards, the programs the U.S. government has established to reduce poverty are relatively small. Among the seven largest industrial countries, the United States spends the smallest percentage of its national income on direct government provision of social-welfare benefits; we prefer instead to use, much more than those other countries do, a variety of tax preferences to induce the private provision of welfare benefits, especially health care and occupational pensions. And if anything, our welfare system has become more different from Europe’s in recent decades, especially in the wake of the most significant modern reform of welfare, in 1996. “Although some European countries have moved toward the U.S. policy of pushing single mothers to work, no European government has been willing to impose the tough measures that are now common in the United States,
such as time limits on benefit receipt or cessation of benefit payments for mothers who refuse to work,” Burtless and Haskins noted.

Political support for government redistribution is much greater in Europe than in America. Americans care far more about alleviating poverty among those they consider deserving of help than they care about reducing inequality per se. These differences of attitude are clearly crucial to America’s distinctive social policies. Burtless and Haskins pointed out that, “while almost two-thirds of Americans agree with the statement that ‘income differences in the United States are too large,’ policies aimed at reducing income differences command relatively little popular support.” When Americans are asked to report their priorities, inequality ranks quite low, and much lower than it does in other advanced democracies. “A large majority of Americans believe that individuals should bear primary responsibility for supporting themselves,” they note, “whereas voters in other rich countries are more inclined to believe that governments have an obligation to assure that everyone is provided for.” But Americans also believe that upward mobility is much more prevalent in our country than it actually is—our faith in mobility stands out among developed nations, while our actual levels of mobility do not.

The flip side of lesser government support for the poor when compared with Europe’s social programs is America’s truly exceptional private philanthropy. As Arthur Brooks pointed out in his contribution to the volume, all developed economies have non-governmental sectors, but what sets the United States apart is the extent to which this sector provides key public services funded by massive private support. In the late 1990s, he notes, Europe’s largest non-profit sector (in the United Kingdom) was about 14% of the size of the U.S. sector, and this difference has likely grown since then.

Even more exceptional, the vast majority of support for the U.S. non-profit sector is purely voluntary: Private charitable donations totaled more than $358 billion in 2014, about 2% of GDP, representing an increase for the fifth year in a row. About three-quarters of this voluntary giving is from living individuals; the rest comes from foundations, corporations, and bequests. As Brooks noted, “No developed country approaches American giving and volunteering levels.” On a per-capita basis, Americans generally give about three times what the French do and seven times what the Germans do.
“These differences,” Brooks wrote, “are not attributable to demographic characteristics such as education, income, age, sex, or marital status.” And they reflect several deep differences between the U.S. and comparable societies in Europe. For example, government’s larger role in European countries “crowds out” private philanthropy and volunteering more than in our less statist country. Brooks cited economists’ estimates that a dollar in public support for social-welfare services displaces at least 25 cents in private giving and reduces private voluntarism as well. Another difference has to do with religious belief, which is the single most important predictor of charitable activity. In 2000, religious people were 10 percentage points more likely than secularists to give money to explicitly non-religious charities and 21 points more likely to volunteer, Brooks noted. Conservative citizens tend to be more charitable than liberal ones; people who believe that the government should not equalize incomes gave, on average and after controlling for demographic variables, four times as much money and other forms of philanthropy to charity as those who believe that the government should do more equalization.

WHO WE ARE

Essential to the exceptional American belief in mobility is the American immigrant story. Even now that immigration is once again at the center of heated debates, the American approach to immigration and its place in our cultural self-understanding stands out among those of other nations. Indeed, if there is any one aspect of American life that even exceptionalism skeptics would concede is exceptional, it is immigration. As I noted in my own contribution to the volume, the U.S. is by far the leading destination for immigrants. The foreign-born population now exceeds 40 million, and the proportion of foreign-born Americans is roughly back at the record-setting 14% first reached a century ago (before sharp constraints on immigration brought it down to less than half that). A million more immigrants, the vast majority of them authorized, now arrive each year. About half the arrivals to the U.S. since 1965 have come from Latin America and more than a quarter from Asia — ethnic backgrounds very different from those of the national population a half-century ago.

A number of other OECD countries now have similarly high percentages of foreign-born residents, but for almost all of them — Australia
since the late 1950s, Sweden since the 1990s — this has been a relatively recent development. By the same token, ethnic diversity in some of those countries is also great today, though not as great as ours.

Americans generally support legal immigration, not just because so many identify as the descendants of immigrants, but also because of the immense social gains that most Americans think it has produced: economic expansion and competitiveness, population growth, cultural diversity and enrichment, invigoration of religious communities, promotion of tolerance, a solidarity that is civic rather than primordial, and much more. They tend to admire legal immigrants both as a group and as individuals, and believe that they have been good for the country — although opinions about unauthorized immigrants are of course far more negative.

The pace of immigrants’ social integration also sets the United States apart. By any definition, it is proceeding rapidly, although at rates that differ from group to group (and indeed from subgroup to subgroup). The U.S. economy, both formal and informal, produces a very low immigrant unemployment rate, unlike European economies where immigrants fare far worse. Hispanics and Asians and Pacific Islanders in the U.S. live longer than whites. Immigrants now acquire English fluency at roughly the same rate as earlier waves did. American-born children of immigrants learn English at school and strongly prefer it to their parents’ native language; virtually all members of the second generation speak it proficiently by the end of high school; and the third generation is largely monolingual in English — and likes it that way. American law also makes citizenship relatively easy to acquire (and almost impossible to lose), which facilitates immigrants’ integration and strengthens their new national identity.

Another significant index, as well as a key cause, of immigrant assimilation is the high rate of interethnic marriage, particularly between whites and Asian women and Hispanics, and the rapid residential integration of those groups into white-majority urban and suburban communities. Also important to their integration are the allure and ethnic diversity of a powerful mass media and popular culture, and the receptiveness of America’s religious communities to newcomers who are re-invigorating and often transforming these communities.

Most unusual, from a comparative perspective, is the fact that no nativist political party or significant anti-immigrant movement exists in
the U.S., unlike virtually all other immigrant-receiving countries. Even the relatively conservative and nationalistic Republican Party supports immigration on the whole, although it differs from the Democratic Party on some immigration policy issues. In the 2016 election cycle, hostility to illegal immigration has often reached a fever pitch among some Republicans, but most GOP (and all Democratic) candidates recognize the need to legalize many of the undocumented, while differing over the conditions of such a program. Most tellingly, essentially no prominent politician in either political party has supported restricting legal immigration below today’s relatively high levels—although they all insist on more careful screening of refugees and other processed immigrants for terrorist ties.

Finally, America’s unique success in integrating immigrants is also evidenced by the experience of Muslims, who express far more alienation in European societies than they do here. Some of this experiential and attitudinal difference reflects demographic patterns in the two regions. Muslims in the U.S. are highly diverse in terms of countries and regions of origin, languages, and even race (half of native-born Muslims, 20% of the total American Muslim population, are black). American Muslims are also more prosperous, educated, politically active, and integrated into the larger society (including in terms of citizenship) than their European counterparts; indeed, American Muslims equal or exceed the income and education levels of the general population. The greater religiosity of Americans in general, noted earlier, makes for a more congenial environment for devout Muslims (and other immigrants) than the far more secular societies of Europe. The lower barriers in the U.S. to family-based immigration, entrepreneurship, and employment growth also play their part, as does the now-longstanding celebration of ethnic diversity in America.

This celebration of difference points to another important cultural distinction between the United States and many comparable nations. In her contribution to the volume, cultural historian and critic Martha Bayles pointed out that American popular culture is extraordinarily diverse and rich—and always has been. In a sense, this cultural diversity is itself one of our chief exports. It arouses some hostility, of course, particularly in more traditionalist (especially Muslim) societies, but it has been immensely influential in shaping a truly global popular culture.
The vibrancy of our popular culture has a lot to do with the history, character, and organization of the American mass media. And these, as S. Robert Lichter showed in his contribution to the volume, are all quite different than in other advanced democracies. The First Amendment, and the tradition of freedom from government censorship that produced it, have no counterpart abroad: “In Europe, most newspapers and magazines began as organs of ideologically aligned groups such as political parties and churches, with which they retained connections into recent times. In the United States, most publishers had shed their partisan ties by the mid-nineteenth century. They were much more concerned with profit margins than group attachments,” Lichter noted. “[T]he mass media in the United States have primarily been privately owned businesses…. [which] have enjoyed unequalled freedom and government support, and electronic media have been regulated relatively lightly.” He concluded that current conditions in the communications industry are making the American media “simultaneously more decentralized, diverse, competitive, and contentious” compared with Europe.

**Wilsonian exceptionalism**

These general descriptive terms—decentralized, diverse, competitive, and contentious—actually describe what makes America unique on a whole host of fronts. Stepping back from the particulars, and from the descriptive analyses offered up by experts in specific segments of American life, one is struck by the way in which what makes America exceptional seems, again and again, to be its resistance to being homogenized and regulated by government.

Not only in his work on *Understanding America* but also in his vast body of work spanning half a century, James Q. Wilson frequently emphasized the significance of this diversity and libertarian streak. He drew subtle distinctions and analyzed the causes of exceptional outcomes while cautioning against over-generalizing from them. His brand of social science stayed close to the ground—to the facts, to the people’s attitudes and behaviors, to complicated motives and patterns—rather than trafficking in simple explanations and easy abstractions. This distinctly Wilsonian approach to exceptionalism is especially valuable today. It demands that we carefully consider the many distinctive—and in some cases unique—features of American life, while urging us to
be skeptical about their applicability to other societies. The empirical evidence summarized here and presented extensively in *Understanding America* shows that, however one defines “exceptional,” the term unquestionably applies to us in a purely descriptive sense.

**Normatively**, the picture is surely mixed. Some of our country’s exceptional features—like its political stability, decentralization, competitiveness, successful integration of immigrants, vibrant media, and remarkably robust non-profit sector supported by unparalleled private philanthropy—are praiseworthy. Others, like our growing economic inequality, violence, child poverty, adversarial legal culture, and demoralized public bureaucracy are deplorable. Fortunately, much of this is remediable, as James Q. Wilson would have reminded us. But, I think he would have added, some of it probably is not.