

American Exceptionalism: Explorations into ‘Why it Didn’t Happen’

In terms of social welfare programs, as well as the strength of the social democratic movements that have historically spearheaded these programs, the United States stands out as an exceptional case when compared to the industrialized countries of Western Europe. In relative and historical terms, the social democratic and labor-based political movements in the U.S. have been numerically weaker and more fragmented than those found in Western Europe, where broad-based social democratic parties dominated governments or governing coalitions throughout much of period that followed the Second World War. Likewise, comparing program coverage, comprehensiveness and expenditures to GDP reveals that social welfare programs throughout Western Europe, are broader and more robust than the scattered array of provisions found in the U.S.

This piece reviews some of the social science literature that attempts to explain American exceptionalism, or the weakness of America’s social democracy relative to social democracy in other, mainly Western European countries. In doing so, I will focus on three key arguments, The first argument, which is widely referred to as historical institutionalism, maintains that the fragmented nature of political authority within the American state, as well as the strong links between the civil service and political parties, undermined the unity, the bureaucratic autonomy and the expertise necessary to consolidate a programmatic, national-level welfare state similar to those found in Western Europe. By contrast, a second argument focuses on the role of American values and the divisions within and across organized labor as principle explanations for the lack of a unified class-based party with the capacity to spearhead social democratic policies.

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Finally, other authors explain the weaknesses of social democracy in the U.S. by pointing to the saliency of race and racism in American policies - rather than class and classism. As the argument goes, racism effectively blocked the formation of a broad-based social democratic movement with the capacity to build a consensus around robust social welfare programs. Let us now turn to a detailed account of each argument as well as a general discussion on the merits of each.

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I. Historical Institutionalism

In explaining American exceptionalism, Skocpol, Weir, and Orloff draw from historical institutionalism, or what Orloff labels as the *institutional political process approach*.¹ This approach sees the process of institutionalization as a process in history that narrows the 'field' of policy options by structuring the environment in which policy design and implementation take place, thus creating institutional venues that empower some individuals and organizations while disempowering others. The historical institutional perspective evokes the concept of "path-dependency," where prior policy choices shape future policy alternatives by adding durable structures that constrain future decision-making and resource allocation. For social democracy and American political development, this approach attends "to the ways in which U.S. state formation shaped the American political universe, within which alliances were formed and policies were formulated."²

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Skocpol, Weir, and Orloff point to several institutional developments throughout American political history as explanations for American exceptionalism, each of which

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