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Americans See U.S. as Exceptional; 37% Doubt Obama Does

Majority believe U.S. at risk of losing status as greatest country in the world

by Jeffrey M. Jones

PRINCETON, NJ -- Americans widely agree that the United States has a unique character because of its history and Constitution that sets it apart from other nations as the greatest in the world. This view, commonly referred to as "U.S. exceptionalism," is shared by at least 73% of Americans in all party groups, including 91% of Republicans.

Because of the United States' history and its Constitution, do you think the U.S. has a unique character that makes it the greatest country in the world, or don't you think so?

	% Yes, think so	% No, do not
All Americans	80	18
Democrats	73	23
Independents	77	23
Republicans	91	7

USA Today/Gallup, Dec. 10-12, 2010

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At the same time that Americans believe the U.S. is exceptional, they also are inclined to believe that status is far from secure, according to the Dec. 10-12 *USA Today*/Gallup poll. Three-quarters of those who believe the U.S. is exceptional (62% of all Americans) also believe the U.S. is currently at risk of losing its unique character.

The poll does not delve into possible reasons why Americans think the United States' stature is at risk. It is possible this viewpoint reflects Americans' tendency to see national conditions as getting worse rather than improving. Gallup has observed this pattern in a variety of areas, including [the state of U.S. morals](#), [the quality of the environment](#), [the crime situation in the U.S.](#), and [the economy](#).

Some Republican critics, however, imply that Barack Obama's policies, including his approach to foreign policy, are a threat to the United States' status as the world's greatest nation.

On the whole, Americans, by 58% to 37%, believe Obama thinks the U.S. is exceptional, consistent with what he and his advisers maintain. But Americans are less likely to believe Obama holds this view than they are to think the same about Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush.

Just your best guess, do you think -- [RANDOM ORDER] -- believes/believed the U.S. has a unique character that makes it the greatest country in the world, or not?

	% Yes, believes/ believed	% No, does not/ did not
Ronald Reagan	86	9
Bill Clinton	77	19
George W. Bush	74	22
Barack Obama	58	37

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Americans who identify as Republicans, likely reflecting the opinions of some of their party's leaders, are especially dubious that Obama regards the U.S. as exceptional. Thirty-four percent of Republicans believe the president thinks the United States is the greatest country in the world, while 61% believe he does not. Democrats are much more confident that Obama regards the United States as exceptional, while the majority of independents agree.

Does Barack Obama Believe the U.S. Has a Unique Character that Makes It the Greatest Country in the World, by Political Party

	% Yes, Obama does	% No, Obama does not
All Americans	58	37
Democrats	83	12
Independents	57	38
Republicans	34	61

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Americans Believe U.S. Has Responsibility to Lead in World Affairs

One of the extensions of the belief in American exceptionalism is the notion that, because of its status, the United States has an obligation to be the leading nation in world affairs. Americans generally endorse this position, as 66% say the United States has "a special responsibility to be the leading nation in world affairs." Republicans, Democrats, and independents generally agree, with fairly modest differences among party supporters.

Do you think the United States does or does not have a special responsibility to be the leading nation in world affairs?

	% Yes, does	% No, does not
All Americans	66	31
Democrats	61	33
Independents	64	33
Republicans	73	26

USA Today/Gallup, Dec. 10-12, 2010

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Implications

Some of President Obama's potential Republican challengers are among those who have suggested that the U.S. is exceptional, but that this status is at risk. This could be an issue in the 2012 presidential campaign. Given that Americans already believe that the U.S. is exceptional and that its status as the greatest nation in the world is at risk, Republican candidates' political challenges would be to convince voters that Obama's policies and actions on the world stage are to blame, and that he does not share their values on this issue.

On the other hand, Americans' beliefs about U.S. exceptionalism may in general reflect a tendency to be patriotic when asked about the United States. And their views about the United States' exceptional status being at risk could stem from their usually seeing conditions for the United States as getting worse rather than better in a variety of areas. Thus, it is not clear how entrenched their views of U.S. exceptionalism are, and, more importantly, how consequential these views may be to their 2012 vote.

Survey Methods

Results for this *USA Today*/Gallup poll are based on telephone interviews conducted December 10-12, 2010, with a random sample of 1,019 adults, aged 18 and older, living in the continental U.S., selected using random-digit-dial sampling.

For results based on the total sample of national adults, one can say with 95% confidence that the maximum margin of sampling error is ± 4 percentage points.

Interviews are conducted with respondents on landline telephones (for respondents with a landline telephone) and cellular phones (for respondents who are cell phone-only). Each sample includes a minimum quota of 150 cell phone-only respondents and 850 landline respondents, with additional minimum quotas among landline respondents for gender within region. Landline respondents are chosen at random within each household on the basis of which member had the most recent birthday.

Samples are weighted by gender, age, race, education, region, and phone lines. Demographic weighting targets are based on the March 2009 Current Population Survey figures for the aged 18 and older non-institutionalized population living in continental U.S. telephone households. All reported margins of sampling error include the computed design effects for weighting and sample design.

In addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of public opinion polls.

[View methodology, full question results, and trend data.](#)

For more details on Gallup's polling methodology, visit www.gallup.com.

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