

American Exceptionalism – Conceptual Thoughts and Empirical Evidence

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1 Introduction¹

This article is about the concept of American exceptionalism. The term has a long history and has been applied to a whole range of features that are unique to US society, particularly its history, identity, and culture (Lipset 1996; Madsen 1998). To recount the evolution of the concept of American exceptionalism and to give a comprehensive account of the diverse meanings it has assumed over time is beyond the scope of this paper.² I will therefore limit my discussion to a very specific aspect of the topic, which has recently received a lot of attention. In the context of US foreign policy, the label “exceptionalism” has increasingly been used with respect to an American tendency to remain outside of multilateral regimes and to an unwillingness to abide by the norms of international law (compare e.g. Luck 2003; Ignatieff 2005b). Even in this more limited context, the meaning of the concept of exceptionalism not clear, but remains vague and inconsistent. I aim to contribute to a clearer understanding of the concept of exceptionalism, as it refers to American policies toward multilateral regimes.

In the article I explore both the present use and the analytical utility of the concept of American exceptionalism. In the first section of the essay, I discuss its use in the literature about US foreign policy. In comparing and contrasting it with unilateralism – another prominent concept with some overlapping connotations – I try to identify what the term can add to our understanding. I distinguish between two methodologically separate ways to apply the concept. The first variant emphasizes the idiosyncrasies in the American behavior, leaving their reasons unexplored, and thus treating exceptionalism – either explicitly or implicitly – as a dependent variable. The latter regards American exceptionalism itself as an explanation or cause of foreign policy behavior, treating it as an independent variable. I will discuss the conceptual advantages and problems with each of those variants.

In the second section, I discuss the empirical evidence for American exceptionalism and unilateralist views in public opinion data. First, I look for evidence of exceptionalist beliefs among the American public. Subsequently, I explore the question of whether these exceptionalist beliefs lead to unilateral attitudes and policy preferences on questions of foreign policy. I conclude by summing up these findings and making suggestions for further research.

¹ I want to thank the members of the Research Unit *The Americas* of Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik for valuable comments and contributions to an earlier version of this draft.

² While „exceptionalism“ has also been used referring to other nations, e.g. Russia, China or Israel, *American* exceptionalism has received a level of attention that make a inquiry limited to the US appear to be a worthwhile enterprise. I use the terms “exceptionalism” and “*American* exceptionalism” interchangeably, leaving open, whether the argument can be applied to other countries and situations.

2 “American Exceptionalism” – the Concept

On the most general level, ‘American exceptionalism’ refers to the belief “that the United States differs qualitatively from other developed nations, because of its unique origins, national credo, historical evolution, and distinctive political and religious institutions” (Koh 2005, p.225). As John Winthrop (1996 [1630]), one of the first settlers and governor of Massachusetts, reminds us with the famous phrase of the *city upon a hill*, the discourse on American exceptionalism goes back a long way, even predating the birth of the United States as a nation state. The phrase has ever since held a firm place in the American collective memory, exemplified by its more contemporary resurrection in Presidential speeches.³ The term “American exceptionalism” is attributed to Alexis de Tocqueville, who noted that the United States held a special place among nations, because it was as a country of immigrants and the first modern democracy (Tocqueville 1954).⁴ As Deborah Madsen (1998, p.1) concludes, the phenomenon has been with us ever since: “American exceptionalism permeates every period of American history and is the single most powerful agent in a series of arguments that have been fought down the centuries concerning the identity of America and Americans.”

Winthrop’s quote also shows that the Puritan settlers who founded the Massachusetts Bay colony regarded their social experiment not only as “different”, but also as exemplary. Malone and Khong (2003) describe exceptionalism as “the widely held belief in the United States that its values and institutions are the best yet devised, the conviction that the world needs to adapt itself to American ways rather than vice versa.” The belief in the superiority of the American model is reflected in the perception among Americans of America’s role in the world.⁵ That American foreign policy is based on moral principles is a consistent theme in the American discourse – a phenomenon recognized even by those who are skeptic of such an assessment.⁶

³ Compare Kennedy (1961) and Reagan (2005 [1974]). There have since been numerous variations of this theme, among them America as: mankind’s last best hope, beacon on a hill, god’s own country, the indispensable nation and Jacksonian idea of Manifest Destiny.

⁴ Lipset – referring to de Tocqueville – names five basic features of American ideology: liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissezfaire. Symptomatic for authors dealing with American exceptionalism in a broader context, he derives from these characteristics explanations for characteristics as diverse as the lack of a welfare state, American’s continued religiosity or the persistence of capital punishment (Lipset 1996, p.26).

⁵ This relation also works in the opposite direction. As Rudolf (1999, p. 73)notes, the definition of an international role for the US at the same time serves as a definition and affirmation of its national identity.

⁶ As Stanley Hoffman (2005, p.225) notes, “[t]he lofty feeling of democratic superiority and universal relevance was perfectly compatible, in practice, with a pursuit of national interest and advantage that was just as fierce as elsewhere.” Note that the term exceptionalism is almost exclusively used by those who are at least somewhat

Limiting the discussion to the realm of international affairs, and taking America's self-perception of its morality-based foreign policy as a point of departure does not provide us with a sufficiently clear idea about American exceptionalism. As I will demonstrate below, there is considerable disagreement about what a "moral" foreign policy means with regard to concrete decisions. Moreover, a range of different aspects of American foreign have been subsumed under the label exceptionalism.⁷ In this paper I only deal with exceptionalism as it applies to international regimes, such as multilateral organizations and international law, in particular the tendency to stay out of multilateral regimes, to claim exemptions from universal rules, or disregard (or substantially re-interpret) the norms of international law. As I show below this limited area displays enough analytical problems to justify its own investigation.

Exceptionalism: Explanans or Explanandum?

In the context just mentioned, exceptionalism is often used as a general label for a pattern of observable behavior. The bottom line is that Americans demand to be treated differently from everyone else. Michael Ignatieff (2005a, p.3), describing US policies toward multilateral human rights agreements, subsumes three specific types of behavior under the concept:

First, the United States signs on to international human rights and humanitarian law conventions and treaties and then exempts itself from their provisions by explicit reservation, nonratification, or non-compliance. Second, the United States maintains a double standard: judging itself and its friends by more permissive criteria than it does its enemies. Third, the United States denies jurisdiction to human rights law within its own domestic law, insisting on the self-contained authority of its own domestic rights tradition.

Against the backdrop of this quote it is worth asking how exceptionalism relates to unilateralism. Malone and Khong (2003, p.3) offer this definition of unilateralism – again in the context of international regimes: " 'Unilateralism,' [...] refers to a tendency to *opt out* of a multilateral framework (whether existing or proposed) or to *act alone* in addressing a particular global or regional challenge rather than choosing to participate in collective action" (emphasis their's). Unilateralism is thus defined *ex negativo* as the absence of multilateral behavior. Whether exceptionalism can be regarded as a special form of unilateralism depends on one's definition of multilateral behavior, since typical exceptionalist behavior entails not opting-out of a multilateral framework, but remaining inside and restricting the effect of the regime by claiming special privileges. Under a purely formalistic definition of multilateralism, we can therefore accommodate some forms of exceptionalist behavior. However, there are

critical of the claim of a strictly moral foreign policy. Proponents of the notion that US intentions are generally noble, do not usually refer to the term. For an exception, see Koh (2005).

⁷ Leggold and McKeown (1995, p.369) subsume under exceptionalism – which they ironically call – the "only clearly articulated view of American foreign policy" – that Americans "deprecate power politics and old-fashioned diplomacy, mistrust powerful standing armies and entangling peacetime commitments, make moralistic judgments about other people's domestic systems, and believe that liberal values transfer readily to foreign affairs."

definitions of multilateralism that go beyond such a formal understanding. If we base our assessment on John Ruggie's standard definition of a qualitative multilateralism characterized by indivisibility, generalized principles of conduct, and diffuse reciprocity (Ruggie 1992), exceptionalism falls outside of multilateralism, for it is incompatible with the requirements of generalized principles and reciprocity.

Consequently, there is an overlap between exceptionalism and unilateralism, but exceptionalism is more nuanced as a description of American behavior. Exceptionalism places somewhat more emphasis on the double standard in American behavior. While resorting to unilateral action does not *per se* deny the same right to anyone else, an exceptionalist claim assumes that the rest have to play by the (multilateral) rules, while the US can disregard them. Francis Fukuyama (2006, p. 101) illustrates this nicely by interpreting the 2002 National Security Strategy (NSS) as an affirmation of exceptionalism:

Clearly, a doctrine of preventive war is not one that can be safely generalized throughout the international system. [...] The fact that the United States granted itself a right that it would deny to other countries is based, in the NSS, on an implicit judgment that the United States is different from other countries and can be trusted to use its military power justly and wisely in ways that other powers could not.

In spite of the overlapping meanings of unilateralism and exceptionalism, introducing the latter contributes to a better understanding by bringing the characteristic element of a claim to moral superiority into focus. Distinguishing the two concepts has an additional advantage. While it is sometimes difficult to distinguish exceptionalist and unilateral *policies*, it is possible to distinguish exceptionalist and unilateralist *beliefs*. As I will show in the second half of this paper, the American public shows clear signs of an exceptionalist identity, without necessarily having unilateralist attitudes about America's role in the world. Confusing the two leads to serious fallacies in the interpretation of US public opinion, and potentially in exploring the reasons for US unilateral behavior. Before we get to that, however, I will discuss the possibility of a causal relationship between exceptionalism and unilateralism.

Exceptionalism as the *Explanans*

In the last sections I have treated exceptionalism and unilateralism as two concepts on the same analytical level. They refer to somewhat different phenomena, but they are both used to describe a specific observable pattern of behavior. There is, however, another possibility to conceptualize the relationship between exceptionalism and unilateralism. Some authors apply exceptionalism to *explain* America's unilateralist tendencies. To quote Malone and Khong (p. 14) again:

[...] U.S. exceptionalism can be seen as a widely held conviction among Americans that the United States, by virtue of its unique attributes, has a special destiny among nations. The U.S. belief in a national mission at the international level is an important impulse for its unilateral action. (p. 14)

In this quote Malone and Khong use the vague term *impulse* to describe the relationship between exceptionalism and unilateralism. Elsewhere they are more explicit and describe exceptionalism as one of the *causes* for unilateralism (p.4). This is due to the fact that their main subject of investigation – or dependent variable – is U.S. unilateralism. Exceptionalism, in this context, turns into an explanatory variable. It seems as though such a relationship is what many scholars have in mind when they refer to American exceptionalism. They depart from the observation of unilateral behavior, and regard exceptionalism as some deeper root cause.

Often, authors are not explicit about explanatory and dependent variables. Edward Luck (2003, p.3) describes exceptionalist countries the following way (not limiting the definition to the United States, but clearly with the US in mind):

... in the context of international organization, four related characteristics stand out:

- (1) a willingness to go it alone on a variety of issues, along with apparent immunity to the pressures and criticisms of others;
- (2) an assumption that its national values and practices are universally valid and its policy positions are moral and proper, not just expedient;
- (3) a strong tendency to look inwards, to domestic political considerations and processes, when determining how to act in international forums, in some cases coupled with a willingness to adopt national legislation that contradicts the rules and responsibilities imposed by international arrangements; and
- (4) a belief by national policy-makers and legislators that they have other options for pursuing their nation's interests and that acting through multilateral institutions is only an option, not an obligation.

It is not clear from the enumeration of these four criteria, whether they have a descriptive or explanatory character. Writing about US ambivalence toward human rights treaties, Andrew Moravcsik explicitly treats exceptionalism as a dependent variable. Among his explanatory variables for US behavior he mentions a “distinctive American rights culture” (Moravcsik 2005). Other scholars would surely regard this “distinctive rights culture” as an aspect of American exceptionalism itself and therefore part of the explanandum.⁸ Harold Koh also mentions the distinctive rights culture as one of four types of exceptionalism.⁹ He explicitly traces this culture to America's “peculiar social, political, and economic history.” Again, even though Koh reserves the term exceptionalism for the dependent variable, namely US behavior, he attributes that behavior to cultural and historical causes.

⁸ While this cannot be held against Moravcsik, for he is consistent an explicit in the use of the concept, it adds to the general confusion.

⁹ The others he calls different labels (meaning that the US has a different terminology for what are in practice the same values); a “flying buttress mentality” (compliance with standards without ratifying the respective agreements), and double standards.

If the use of exceptionalism for describing observable behavior and its use for referring to cultural identity are not clearly separated, the analysis becomes murky. Statements about exceptionalist behavior may then assume cultural connotations, whether intended or not. If a cultural argument – that exceptionalist behavior is a consequence of American culture, history, and identity – is made, this argument should be made explicit and subjected to critical evaluation. If the term is only applied to describe a certain pattern of behavior, leaving the reasons unexplored, this, too should be made explicit.

Problems with using exceptionalism as an independent variable

As mentioned in the beginning of this paper, exceptionalism has always had a powerful presence in American discourse. Every president has invoked the theme of a unique America in some way or another. Consequently, a recurring theme is that foreign policy choices are made for moral reasons (this is especially true for justification of resorting to the use of force). Ruggie (1998) has observed that selfish national-interest justifications for American policy have never resonated well with the American public, and even Henry Kissinger, who as a realist was highly critical of moral rhetoric, recognized the importance of moralistic discourse in US foreign policy.¹⁰

The ubiquity of exceptionalist arguments, however, creates problems for the analysis of cause and effect. Once skillful decision-makers realize that it takes a moral argument to sell a certain policy to the public they will clothe any decision in moralistic arguments. That leads to the question whether an exceptionalist rhetoric can tell us anything about the actor's motives, or is just used as a justification for policies motivated by other considerations.¹¹

And to further complicate the matter, even if we grant that decision-makers are truly motivated by exceptionalist considerations, the belief that US foreign policy should be firmly based on moral principles can lead to inconsistent or even conflicting implications. This is precisely the case in the debate about unilateralism. Both the supporters and the opponents of a multilateral foreign policy refer to American exceptionalism. In the mentioned article, Moravcsik identifies four aspects of American identity and political culture that serve as obstacles to a more multilateral behavior toward international institutions: the individualistic, anti-socialist orientation; a deep belief in popular sovereignty combined with a distrust of

¹⁰ He names as traditional themes “the uniqueness of America’s mission as the exemplar of liberty, the moral superiority of democratic foreign policy, the seamless relationship between personal and international morality, the importance of open diplomacy, and the replacement of the balance of power by international consensus as expressed in the League of Nations.” (Kissinger 1994, p. 371-72)

¹¹ Even though a strict constructivist might question this differentiation, based on the view that discourse and motivations constitute one another.

central government that could be transferred to international institutions; a constitutional patriotism; and other forms of nationalism. Yet, Ikenberry sees unique features in the American political heritage that *encourage* multilateral behavior (Ikenberry 2003, p.543):

“[...] behind these political-intellectual traditions are deeper aspects of the American political identity that inform the way the United States seeks to build order in the larger global system. The enlightenment origin of the American founding has given the United States a political identity of self-perceived universal significance and scope. The republican democratic tradition that enshrines the rule of law reflects an enduring American view that polities – domestic or international – are best organized around rules and principles of order. America’s tradition of civic nationalism also reinforces this notion that the rule of law is the source of legitimacy and political inclusion. This tradition provides a background support for a multilateral foreign policy.”

Patrick (2002, p.7) tries to reconcile these two positions, claiming that “exceptionalism pulls in two directions, encouraging both a desire to ‘go it with others’ and an urge to ‘go it alone.’” It is indeed possible to think of numerous examples of what is often called the American ambivalence toward international institutions. One of the best known probably being the story of the League of Nations, in which President Woodrow Wilson championed the idea of a global organization to address common problems, but the Senate prevented US membership.

Yet, a factor “pulling into two directions” does not make for a compelling explanation in the analytical sense. To say the very least, it casts doubt on a strict causal relationship between an exceptionalist identity and unilateral policies. Again, this insight works both ways. Acknowledging that American political identity is somewhat exceptionalist – meaning that the self-perception is one of uniqueness and moral superiority – does not necessitate a preference for unilateral policies. In attempts to explain American unilateralism, one should not fall into the trap of making a direct causal link between an exceptionalist identity and a unilateralist foreign policy.

3 Public Opinion on Exceptionalism

The argument of the previous section has mainly been of an abstract, conceptual nature. In this section I will look more closely at the empirical evidence, more specifically at public opinion data. The data tends to confirm the point that it is necessary to distinguish between and exceptionalist identity and the public's views on American policy towards multilateral regimes.

I will rely mainly on three groups of sources: a series of cross-national opinion survey conducted by Tom Smith and others; the book *Missreading the Public* by Steven Kull and I.M. Destler, which compiles and evaluates most of the public opinion data from the 1990s; and the surveys conducted by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations to check Destler/Kull's conclusions for reliability and take into account more recent surveys taken after the publication of the book. If American exceptionalism is indeed a "widely held belief" or "national credo", as some scholars claim, we should expect to see evidence of it in public opinion. If it is a direct cause for unilateral attitudes, then preferences of unilateral policies should equally show up in the poll results. As my evaluation of the available data shows, there is some indication for American exceptionalism among the public, but very little evidence of unilateral attitudes.

Public opinion and exceptionalism

There is some evidence that Americans regard themselves as unique and exemplary. According to Seymour Martin Lipset (1996, pp. 50-52), Americans have a high regard for their institutions. Their national pride ranks generally higher than in other democracies and they regard the US system as an example to the world. This claim is confirmed by studies on national pride based on cross-national public opinion surveys conducted in 1995/96 and 2003/04 (Smith and Jarkko 1998; Smith 2006; Smith and Kim 2006). The studies compare levels on national pride among countries in North America, Western and Eastern Europe, Asia, and Oceania – 23 countries in the 1995/96 survey and 33 countries in the 2003/04 survey – with the additional inclusion of Latin American countries in the second survey. The surveys distinguish between "General National Pride" and "National Pride in Specific Achievements". The former category is based on agree-disagree statements about patriotism and national pride. The questions are formulated in a manner that an affirmative answer implies that respondents

regard their country as superior to others.¹² The “National Pride in Specific Achievements” ask about pride of one’s country’s role in ten specific areas, such as the performance of its democracy, its economic achievement, its achievement in art, or its history.

In the 1998 study the United States ranks second on each of the scales, if both scales are viewed in combination the US ranks first (Appendix 1, Table 2). In the 2006 study the US ranks second on General National Pride (after Venezuela) and first on National Pride in Specific Achievements tying it for the first place when both categories are considered. The average level of national pride in the US grew between the first and the second study (Smith and Kim 2006, p.130). Furthermore, in the first survey, the US ranks first with respect to pride in its global political influence (Smith and Jarkko. 1998, p.5 and Appendix 2 (Table 5)). 75.9% of respondents said they were proud or very proud of the Global Political Influence of the US (Appendix 2, Table 2). The US also ranked first in responses about pride of its armed forces and its economic achievements. It ranks second in its pride of the way its democracy works, surpassed only by Canada (Appendix 2, Table 4). In the second survey from 2003/04, among the 33 countries included, the US ranks first in pride of the following domains: the way the democracy works; its political influence in the world; its economic achievement; its scientific and technological achievements; and its armed forces. In addition, it ranks second in terms of its pride of its history. Especially the General National Pride levels indicate that a fair number of Americans regard the US as superior to other nations, a finding that confirms the exceptionalist hypothesis. The high level of pride of America’s democracy further shows a regard for its institutions.

Other studies confirm that public opinion shows the existence of decidedly moral outlook on foreign policy, the second component of claims of exceptionalism. Steeper notes that Americans reject the idea of conducting foreign policy solely in terms of self-interest. (Steeper and Lake 1999, p.3). While many in the elite believe that policies only find approval among the American public, if they are clearly related to American interests, polls about specific issues ranging from foreign aid to peacekeeping confirm that Americans are often motivated by altruistic considerations. Some elements I have identified as being part of the exceptionalist paradigm can thus be detected not only the elite discourse, but are common within a wider public.

¹² The questions were: 1) I would rather be a citizen of COUNTRY than of any other country in the world. 2) There are some things about COUNTRY today that makes me ashamed of COUNTRY. 3) The world would be a better place if people from other countries were more like the COUNTRY’S NATIONALITY 4) Generally, speaking COUNTRY is a better country than most other countries 5) People should support their country even if the country is in the wrong. (Smith/Kim 2006, p. 135)

Public Opinion and Multilateralism

From the observation that the public regards the US as exemplary and its institutions as superior cannot be inferred that the majority also favors unilateral foreign policy. In fact, from the best evidence available, it does not.

A particularly valuable contribution about the 1990s is the comprehensive study “Misreading the Public. The Myth of a New Isolationism”. In this book, Steven Kull and I.M. Destler examine public opinion on America’s role in the world, covering multiple forms of US engagement in international affairs, in particular what the authors call “forms of engagement that can be characterized as co-operative with other countries.” (1999, p.11). Although not identical, this characterization comes fairly close to Ruggie’s definition of principled multilateralism.

Throughout the 1990s, Americans supported active engagement in international affairs. Trend line data – in which respondents were asked the exact same question over a number of years – confirms this finding. Asked whether the US “should take an active part in world affairs or stay out,” roughly two thirds responded that the US should take an active part. This was a consistent result with only minor variations in eight separate polls conducted by four different organizations between 1990 and 1996 (ibid., p. 43). More relevant in the context of multilateral agreements is the question whether the US “should go [its] own way in international matters not worrying too much about whether other countries agree with [it] or not.” About two thirds of Americans have consistently rejected such a statement, in polls conducted by the Pew Research Center and its predecessor Times Mirror over the past decades (ibid, p.44). With 72% rejecting the statement in a 2002 poll and 63% in a 2005 poll, we observe a general continuity (Pew Research Center for the People & the Press and Council on Foreign Relations. 2005, p.13).

Another finding from *Misreading the Public* relevant in the context of US exceptionalism refers to the opinions of Americans about the US role as a world leader. With respect to negotiations over multilateral agreements some decision-makers and academics have demanded exceptions from universal rules with a reference to America’s special responsibility as a global provider of stability (compare Hathaway 2000). Yet a clear majority of over 70% of Americans reject the idea that the US play the role of the world policeman (Kull and Destler, p.45).¹³ Neither does maintaining America’s role as the world leader appear to be a major concern for the public (p. 46). According to Kull and Destler, a majority of American prefer “a shared leadership role”. The scholars’ interpretation of a number of polls

¹³ Madsen is among those who sees the mentality of being the world’s police as a result of exceptionalism (Madsen 1998, p.2).

including questions with varying forms of wording suggests that the majority of Americans would like the US to do its fair share of dealing with the world's problems, but to do so in cooperation with others (p.48). One finding of the 1995 "Worldviews" report is that "Americans are increasingly reluctant to shoulder the burdens of international leadership alone, but are willing to share responsibility through participation in multilateral organizations" (*American Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy 1995*. 1995, p.18). This interpretation is confirmed by subsequent surveys. The 1999 report includes a question asking whether the US should act alone if it does not have the support of allies. 72% of the general public rejected this idea (*American Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy 1999*. 1999, p.5). The 2002 "Worldviews" poll asked how the US should go about solving the world's problems. 71% of respondents said the "U.S. should do its share in efforts to solve international problems together with other countries," rather than solve international problems as a world leader in accordance with its superpower status or withdraw from efforts to solve international problems.¹⁴

According to Kull and Destler, solving the world's problems includes maintaining peace and protecting human rights.¹⁵ The authors argue that Americans reject a foreign policy that restricts US engagement to situations, in which the national interest is directly concerned. Whether in giving aid, preventing genocide, or participating in peacekeeping, strong majorities support action even in cases not related to a narrowly defined national interest, irrespective of the specific wording of the question (p. 51). Kull and Destler find that Americans are willing to make limited sacrifices for a common good based on moral concerns. This conclusion is in accordance with the view that there is a moralistic component to U.S. exceptionalism.¹⁶ Yet, the subsequent reports (*Global Views 2004. American Public Opinion and Foreign Policy*. 2004; *Global Views 2006. The United States and the Rise of China*. 2006)

¹⁴ The exact question was: „Which statement comes closest to your position?“ Possible Answers: “As the sole remaining superpower, the U.S. should continue to be the pre-eminent world leader in solving international problems.” (17 %) “The U.S. should do its share in efforts to solve international problems together with other countries.” (71%) “The U.S. should withdraw from most efforts to solve international problems.” (9%) (*Worldviews 2002. American Public Opinion & Foreign Policy*. 2002, Report: P. 27, Topline Data: P. 43)

¹⁵ Particularly notable is the following observation: “[I]n an October 1993 PIPA poll, just days after the deaths of the eighteen U.S. rangers in a fire-fight in Somalia, 88% agreed with the statement: ‘Because the world is so interconnected today, it is important for the United States to participate, together with other countries, in efforts to maintain peace and protect human rights.’”

¹⁶ However, the 1999 Report (*American Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy 1999*, p.19) concludes: “While clearly remaining committed to participating in world affairs, Americans prefer to do so mainly to defend their own interests and alleviate their fears rather than to foster change around the world according to an American model.” This conclusion is based on the finding that altruistic goals generally ranked lower than classic national interest goals. Helping to bring democracy and a higher standard of living to other countries, were both considered very important goals by 29% of respondents. Defending human rights was considered “very important” by 39% and alleviating world hunger by 62%. These findings and Kull and Destler’s interpretation are not exclusive. It is plausible that Americans are more concerned about narrow national security interests, but still willing to make sacrifices for more altruistic goals.

show a decline in the importance attributed to altruistic goals, raising doubts whether Kull and Destler's findings can be upheld in this respect.¹⁷

The United Nations

The ongoing trend line questions about US involvement in the world and the public attitudes toward the United Nations also show continuities. In the 2002 "Worldviews" survey, respondents were asked to rate their feelings toward the United Nations on a scale from 0 to 100 degrees, 100 meaning very positive feelings, 50 a neutral attitude, and 0 very negative feelings, the average response was 64. 57% said strengthening the UN should be a very important foreign policy goal for the US and 28% said it should be somewhat important (*Worldviews 2002. U.S. General Population Topline Report. 2002, p.107*). Going to greater lengths to test the robustness of the opinions held, pollsters confronted respondents with counter-arguments. In addition to the straight-forward question, they were given these additional arguments: "Some say that because of the increasing interaction between countries, we need to strengthen international institutions to deal with shared problems. Others say that this would only create bigger, unwieldy bureaucracies." In reaction to these arguments 77% supported strengthening the UN. Overall, in their 2002 report, the authors attest broad support of international organizations and multilateral agreements across a wide range of issues. The data for the period after 2002 is somewhat ambiguous. While it appears that support for the UN has decreased significantly, a closer look reveals that while the approval ratings for the UN's performance have indeed dropped, a majority of Americans continue to support cooperation with the organization and even strengthening the UN (*America's Place in the World 2005, pp. 7 and 13*). Kull and Destler, who closely monitored performance ratings throughout the 1990s, point out that we observe a lot of fluctuation in the ratings on performance, which correlate with events at the UN and in situations the UN is dealing with (p. 69). In addition, they note that the approval of the UN's performance is not necessarily linked with support of the institution. To illustrate, they show that the UN as an institution at times ranks higher than US institutions. For example, in 1995 respondents were asked "How much of the time do you think you can trust the United Nations to do what is right?" to which 47% answered "just about always". When a different sample was asked the same question about the US government, only 24% gave this answer (p. 70).

Particularly relevant is a question in 2002 survey that tries to address the public's concern for sovereignty. A number of respondents among policymakers and opinion leaders

¹⁷ The more recent results were probably also influenced by problems with the invasion and occupation of Iraq.

assumed that the public is concerned that a stronger UN could limit American sovereignty (p. 63/64). This is precisely the concern that is often voiced in the debate over multilateral agreements. In fact, for the public the loss of sovereignty does not appear to be a major concern.¹⁸

International Legal Institutions

Generally speaking, a majority of the American public is not opposed to international agreements, including recent efforts to initialize new institutions that were subject to great controversy. Polls on subjects ranging from the International Court of Justice to the Kyoto Protocol generated favorable responses.¹⁹ According to “Worldviews 2002”, the Kyoto Protocol was supported by 64% of respondents (21% opposed), the International Criminal Court by 71% (22% opposed), the Landmine treaty by 75% (19% opposed) and the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty by 81% (14% opposed). The 2006 survey additionally asked about the Biological Weapons Convention, which was supported by 89% and opposed by only 8% (*Worldviews 2002. American Public Opinion & Foreign Policy*. 2002, p.17).

Particularly interesting in this regard are the consistent and clear majorities in favor of the International Criminal Court (ICC). It is surprising in the light of the overwhelming resistance of the American foreign policy establishment. A report of the ongoing PIPA research project from the year 2000 states (*Americans on Globalization: A Study of US Public Attitudes*. 2000, p. 46):

Sixty-six percent supported the idea of an International Criminal Court "because the world needs a better way to prosecute war criminals." Just 29% opposed it, even when respondents were given the US argument against it, that "trumped up charges may be brought against Americans, for example, US soldiers who use force in the course of a peacekeeping operation." A March 1999 Greenberg Research poll found 78% of Americans believed there are "rules or laws that are so important that, if broken during war, the person who broke them should be punished." These respondents were then asked, "If these rules are broken in war, who should be responsible for punishing wrongdoers?" An international criminal court was chosen by 40% -- nearly the same percentage as the next two most-commonly chosen answers combined. The "governments in the countries at war" and the "military itself" were each chosen by 21% of the respondents.

“Worldviews 2002” also attempted to find out, how resilient to counter-arguments opinions on the ICC were. As reported above, without additional information 71% supported the ICC with 18% in opposition. Some of the respondents were also asked the following question:

¹⁸ In a November 1995 PIPA poll respondents were asked to react to a number of statements. One statement was: “For the U.S. to move away from its role as world policeman and reduce the burden of its large defense budget, the U.S. should invest in efforts to strengthen the UN’s ability to deal with potential conflicts in the world.” The result was 73 percent in favour and 24% opposed. They were then confronted with the opposite position: “Strengthening the UN is not a good idea because if the UN were to become stronger, the U.S. could become entangled in a system that would inhibit it from full freedom of action to pursue its interest.” (Kull and Destler, p.71)

¹⁹ For the ICJ, see (Kull 2002, p.111); for the Kyoto Protocol compare Worldviews 2002 (*Worldviews 2002. American Public Opinion & Foreign Policy*. 2002, p.33)

A permanent International Criminal Court has been established by the UN to try individuals suspected of war crimes, genocide, and crimes against humanity. Some say the United States should not support the court because trumped up charges may be brought against Americans, for example, U.S. soldiers who use force in the course of a peacekeeping operation. Others say that the U.S. should support the court because the world needs a better way to prosecute war criminals, many of whom go unpunished today. Do you think the U.S. should or should not support the permanent International Criminal Court?

In response to that question 65% of those asked supported the ICC, while 28% opposed it (p. 34). Subsequent polls confirmed support for US participation in the International Criminal Court. In a joint Chicago Council on Foreign Relations/PIPA poll in 2005 clear majorities favored U.S. participation in the International Criminal Court.²⁰

The public opinion data presented so far shows that a majority of Americans support multilateral measures. This is true for international institutions in general, most importantly the United Nations, but it is also true for a number of specific international treaties. Returning to the initial question of whether an exceptionalist identity leads to unilateral attitudes, the answer as suggested by public opinion polls is an emphatic no. While we can see indications of exceptionalism, evidence of unilateralism is very weak. These findings cast doubt on attempts to explain American unilateralism by referring to public opinion.

²⁰ The survey also included a question on whether the situation in Darfur should be referred to the ICC, which most respondents answered affirmatively. The report of the survey's findings also include a breakdown according to party affiliations, which showed that support among respondents who described themselves as Republican, was lower. I will return to this point in the case studies.

4 Conclusion

The point of departure for this paper was the observation that the concept of exceptionalism is increasingly becoming popular both as a description and as an explanation of American policies toward international institutions. If the concept is kept vague, it provides a deceptively handy tool for analyzing everything that is puzzling about American identity and behavior. Yet, as this paper has attempted to show, in order to gain analytical leverage from the introduction of the concept, we need to be precise about what we mean by it. In the absence of clear definitions the concept may well bring about more confusion than clarity.

The first step towards more clarity is being explicit about whether the concept is applied to describe American behavior toward multilateral regimes or American cultural identity. As the previous chapters have chosen, this decision not only has consequences for the level of analysis, but also for exceptionalism's relationship to unilateralism. I have argued that when exceptionalism is applied to the America's habit of exempting itself from the provisions of multilateral agreements and international law, it can be regarded as a specific form of unilateralism. If we operate with a qualitative understanding of principled multilateralism, then such behavior falls into the unilateralist camp of the dichotomy between unilateralism and multilateralism.

If however the concept is applied to American identity, there is an important distinction to be made between exceptionalism and unilateralism. As the public opinion data has shown, it is well possible for the public to hold exceptionalist beliefs about the US without displaying unilateral attitudes with regard to American foreign policy.

The fact that the same term is used to describe both of these very different phenomena implies that the relationship between them is more direct than is actually the case. Although hardly any scholars make this argument, the impression remains that a unique American identity is the sole reason for unilateral policies. While the strong use of exceptionalist rhetoric by American policy-makers to justify unilateral behavior does suggest that the two are connected, the link must be more indirect than previously suspected.

In this paper about American exceptionalism, I do not attempt to fully explain American policies. Nevertheless, to conclude, I present just a few preliminary thoughts on how the exceptionalist (not unilateralist) identity and the exceptionalist (unilateral) policies go together. One factor that cannot be left out is without a doubt the role of American elites. Opinion leaders may be more influential in shaping discourse than the views of the general public. And we know that contrary to our expectations about democracy their views do not

always resemble those of the public at large.²¹ Decision-makers are only forced to adjust their view to those of their constituency, if refusing to do so has negative consequences for them. Questions of foreign policy are not very salient in the American electoral process, since the public's degree of information and interest in the matter is low. This allows leaders to largely follow their own convictions or their perception of what they think the public wants. If this is indeed the case then I hesitate to speak of unilateralism as part of American *identity*. "Ideology" might be a more appropriate description of the views held by a small minority, even if members of this minority are placed in positions where they control policy.

While cultural factors were once neglected in the discipline of international relations, one should be careful not to overestimate their importance either. Sweeping statements about the American identity do not always adequately capture what is going on in reality. Ideas and culture certainly matter, but they, too, have to be subjected to close empirical research. This certainly applies to the concept of American exceptionalism.

²¹ While support among leaders for international engagement is much higher than among the general public, they also have more reservations about entering multilateral agreements.

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