

Terms and Ideas

- American exceptionalism
- Welfare state
- Gig economy
- Precariat
- Fissurization
- Minority rule
- Malapportionment
- Constitutional hardball

Questions

Q: What is the welfare state?

A: The welfare state encompasses the public programs and redistributive policies that protect people from economic risks and provide social guarantees such as pensions, healthcare, and income support. It is through the welfare state that democratic societies pool risks and redistribute resources among citizens.

Q: What explains the lack of a strong welfare state in the United States?

A: The United States features less tax redistribution and government spending aimed at the poor than does Europe. Alesina and Glaeser provide several explanations for this. On one hand, the lack of a strong socialist party, the electoral system, the federal structure, and the separation of powers create institutional limits. Unlike Europe, proportional representation never took hold due to racial divisions and because conservative forces were too powerful. Socialist parties, meanwhile, were not successful because of the geographic size of the United States, the degree of racial heterogeneity, and because the military was strong enough to repress labor movements. On that second point, racial diversity undermined support for welfare policies because minorities were overrepresented among the poor. Finally, more Americans believe that the poor are responsible for their condition and that hard work ensures upward mobility. Alesina and Glaeser argue that this is the result of indoctrination that was possible because of the success of conservative forces in the United States. The American welfare state is therefore small because the political coalitions necessary to build and sustain it never gained power.

Q: What does Thelen argue about the precariat?

A: Thelen situates the rise of gig work within a longer trajectory of labor market transformations across rich democracies. While precarity has become widespread across countries, the United States stands out because its institutional context of weak unions, decentralized bargaining, and limited social protections and labor market regulations have magnified the consequences. In the American fissured workplace, firms subcontract, outsource, and rely on independent contractors to avoid obligations and shift risk to workers. She argues that the policies needed to cushion the precariat are absent in the United States. The implication is that precarity is not only an economic condition but also a consequence of politics.

Q: What is tyranny of the minority?

A: Levitsky and Ziblatt argue that the United States faces democratic backsliding not just because of extreme partisanship but also because American institutions are especially vulnerable to minority

rule. Unlike other advanced democracies, the United States constitution includes multiple counter-majoritarian features. Among these are an overrepresented rural senate, an electoral college that can produce minority-vote presidents, federalism, lifetime judicial appointments and judicial review, and extreme barriers to constitutional change. These features were more manageable when parties respected democratic norms, but at present these empower extreme minorities and allow parties to win power without majorities. The United States therefore shows how the interaction between institutions and polarization is central to democratic outcomes.

Q: How does race factor into this week?

A: Alesina and Glaeser argue that racial heterogeneity in the United States has made redistribution more politically contentious. Racialized poverty has made it easier for elites to undermine support for welfare by framing public goods as benefits to racial outgroups. Their evidence shows that more racially fragmented societies spend less on redistributive programs, and that American views of poverty differ from European views in ways aligned with racial narratives. Meanwhile, Levitsky and Ziblatt note that the transition toward a multiracial democracy has triggered an authoritarian backlash among groups fearing status loss. American politics can therefore hardly be separated from race, as this feature of society has shaped institutional design, partisan strategies, and policy outcomes since the country's founding (and might explain how the United States is so distinct among advanced democracies).

Takeaways

This week brought us full circle in the course as we examined the United States not as an isolated case but through a comparative lens. A number of the patterns that we have studied over the past semester reappeared in this week: state strength, institutional design, ethnic diversity, democratization, and economic development. Rather than viewing the American case as fundamentally different, the readings suggest that the United States illustrates the same tensions that we have encountered throughout the course; nevertheless, perhaps the unique social foundations of the United States have created distinct political outcomes.

Two questions that were raised in section this week offer further food for thought: 1) To what extent are populist movements self-correction mechanisms inherent to democracies? It seems that there is thin line between populism serving as a pressure-release valve that forces neglected issue onto the political agenda and it leading to democratic corrosion and backsliding. 2) To what extent might some degree of counter-majoritarianism be good? Such institutions might act as stabilizers in some instances and foster broader deliberation, but as we noted this week, can also be used to entrench minority rule.