The American Political Mindset: The Relationship of Exceptionalism and Cynicism in Public Opinion

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The American Political Mindset:

The Relationship of Exceptionalism and Cynicism in Public Opinion

Anya Kaiser

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Abstract

This research investigates the pervasiveness of both political cynicism and American exceptionalism within American society. Throughout history, there has been an interaction between the public's feelings of American exceptionalism and cynicism in the United States, starting at the nation’s founding and continuing into recent times (Chaloupka, 1999). As an interdisciplinary and mixed-methods study, this research utilizes both a nationally representative quantitative data-set and a qualitative analysis of Allen Ginsberg’s (1959) poem “America,” a cultural representation of the relationship between American exceptionalism and cynicism.

Using the American National Election Studies’ 2012 survey on trust in government (N = 5,914), I examine the relationship between distrust in government (a proxy for political cynicism) and feelings of American exceptionalism. Results show a significant relationship between cynicism and feelings of American exceptionalism in the United States, with those who report low trust also reporting greater feelings of American exceptionalism, as compared to those with medium and high trust in government. These associations are stronger for respondents who report high levels of satisfaction with the federal government. The results suggest that feelings of political cynicism and American exceptionalism exist in tandem in American public opinion.
Introduction

To fit in with American conversation during election years, one can assume a particular attitude, demeanor, and phrase to assimilate in a variety of settings. Maintaining a cynical, vague, and slightly bitter stance when discussing the federal government and politicians, can often lead to a few nods of agreement and responses elaborating on “just how horrible today’s politicians are.” “They’re all crooks!,” “Washington only cares about private-interests!” and “you can’t trust any of them” are all complaints after an American political cynic’s own heart. Political malaise is not new- for years the same frustrated statements have circulated, and are often exacerbated during presidential elections. Ironically similar, American exceptionalism is also not new- it has existed for centuries and often rests in the conscious (and subconscious) of many Americans. While political cynicism reminds the common citizen that there is nothing spectacular about American politicians, American exceptionalism tells the common citizen that there is something spectacular about American politicians, or rather American politicians compared to other nation’s politicians.

The contradiction and the dissonance between the pervasiveness of both American exceptionalism and American political cynicism at the same time, among the same citizens, poses an important question: Why? Why do Americans hold such a negative perception of their government and such a positive view of their government simultaneously? For this research, I will examine the relationship between American exceptionalism and American cynicism and distrust in government in an attempt to answer this question. First I will discuss American beliefs on the strength of the federal government and how America compares to other nations in terms of power and might. Second, I will demonstrate the current dissonance between American views
on government trustworthiness domestically and internationally, and go on to discuss the history of this and contributing factors.

Because public opinion is a large determinant in the appearance and functioning of American politics, it is critical to understand not only how Americans view themselves, their government, and their beliefs about American power, but also where these views originate and why they persist. In recent times, a focus (and often a negative one due to the upward trend of postnationalism) on American exceptionalism, particularly in relation to American foreign diplomacy, means it is increasingly important to understand this mix of cynicism and exceptionalism and how it applies to Americans’ worldview and the longevity of the nation.

**Defining Cynicism**

Cynicism, a topic not lacking in both discussion and analysis throughout history, is often tackled in tandem with American culture, or, to be more specific, American counterculture. Jedediah Purdy, a Duke University law and political thought professor, tackles cynicism and a branch of cynicism he refers to as irony. Purdy (1999) describes and critiques American culture for being overly ironic- a term he defines as a fear of disappointment mixed with a refusal to rely on hoping or believing. Irony in America, particularly in American politics, exists through being “insistently doubtful of the qualities that would make us take another person seriously: the integrity of personality, sincere motivation, the idea that opinions are more than symptoms of fear or desire” (p. 6). This definition matches with American public opinion of government as a whole, with a 2015 Pew Research Center poll demonstrating that the majority of Americans do not consider politicians honest and they consider many to be selfish or lazy (Doherty 2015). Because of these negative opinions of politics and government, Purdy (1999) describes a subsequent turn away from politics, explaining each as being caused by a perceived lack of
ability for the common person to do good in the world and succeed. Tied to awareness and higher education, Purdy (1999) describes irony/cynicism as becoming more pervasive among those involved in popular culture, academia, and overall among the broad group that is “young people” (p. 10). Because of his definitions of irony and cynicism in terms of American trust in government, Purdy’s (1999) work serves as an important framework for understanding American political cynicism and how/where it exists among the American people.

More specifically, American cynicism is as much of a popular topic as American exceptionalism, is not short of major research about its depths. R. Jay Magill, Jr. (2006), a scholar on American culture and philosophy, describes the rise of cynicism and distrust in America,

“The notion that today’s American populace is erring, is somehow slipping from its original moorings—those lain by the Puritans, the Founders, Native Americans, Nature, God’s Laws, the British gentry, what have you—remains a strong narrative urge in American social criticism… The ebbing of civic spirit and the growth of cancerous civic malaise, of disengagement and of anomie, has been a central anxiety (and family of metaphors) among many critics alarmed at the state of American society over the past three decades, and not without statistical warrant” (p. 115)

The majority of his work goes on to cite and analyze these specific examples of cynicism and political criticism in America, many of which he describes as “declinist literature” (p. 114). American declinism, as briefly discussed by Magill (2006) is often tied with romanticism about American history and a negative view about the future of social institutions in the U.S., with popular declinists ranging from Alexis de Tocqueville and his Democracy in America text to President Jimmy Carter and his “Crisis of Confidence” speech. I believe that Magill’s (2006)
descriptions and explanations of cynicism and his consideration of American exceptionalism roots in the foundation of the U.S. relate well to this research.

**Defining American Exceptionalism**

Rooted in the foundations of America, American exceptionalism has been reaffirmed throughout history, consistently reiterated in a similar tone to John Winthrop’s 17th Century description of America as a city upon a hill. In a few sentences, Winthrop (1971) describes a view of America that has persisted for centuries, “For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world” (p. 11). These few sentences are the embodiment and foundation of exceptionalism- a belief that one’s country is aided by God, a role-model for others, and entrusted with doing the work of God in the world.

A commonality of literature on American exceptionalism and its pervasiveness in American society and influence on the rest of the world is the frequency of negative analyses of it. One of the top critics of American exceptionalism and global pervasiveness, Andrew Bacevich (2008) criticizes the United States for its “authoritative expression” and exaggerated militarism in global contexts (p. 128). Similarly, Chalmers Johnson (2007), in his series on American imperialism, foretells rampant terrorism in the United States and other Western democracy because of the goal of Pax Americana- an American supervised world. Unlike much of the literature on American exceptionalism, including Bacevich (2008) and Johnson’s (2007) works, Anatol Lieven’s (2005) work does well to maintain a neutral stance and balanced criticism of nationalism and American foreign diplomacy. He introduces an important concept that is relevant to this research: The American Creed. The American Creed can be seen as the
basis for American exceptionalism, the “shared and almost religious belief...in America’s role as
the supreme exemplar of democratic civilization in the world” (Lieven 2005, p. iv). The majority
of the Lieven’s (2005) work is spent describing the extent of the American Creed, with
references to a messianic complex that has existed throughout American in different formats
from the Puritans belief in predetermination to Andrew Jackson’s manifest destiny to Ronald
Reagan’s city on a hill.

Andrew Kohut, a founder of Pew Research Center, and Bruce Stokes, director of Global
Economic Attitudes at Pew, quantitatively illustrate the existence of American exceptionalism in
twenty-first century America and provide an image of exactly how exceptional Americans feel
they are in terms of foreign prowess and diplomacy. Kohut & Stokes (2006) take more of a
broad, comparativist approach when considering American exceptionalism, wherein data
regarding American opinion are discussed alongside data regarding Western European opinions.
exceptionalism score that is twice that of any major Western democracy, while the same Western
democracies’ citizens report not the United States but Australia to be the “land of opportunity”
(p. 35). In a 2005 poll, Americans ranked themselves as the most favorable nation out of a list of
Western democracies, while most other nations polled reported a different country as more
favorable than their own. Though this source offers a rich description of observable,
quantitatively measured American exceptionalism, it does little to measure American political
cynicism and instead focuses primarily on other countries’ views of America as a whole.
Nonetheless, the data collected by the Pew Research Center and analyzed by Kohut & Stokes
(2006) offers a good basis for measurement of American exceptionalism.

Cynicism and its Relation to American Exceptionalism
One of the few works that focuses specifically on both topics of this research, William Chaloupka’s (1999) *Everybody Knows: Cynicism in America* tackles the roots of American political cynicism and discusses its discrepancy with ongoing American exceptionalism. Chaloupka (1999) analyzes the role of cynicism in America and how it originates in the founding of the United States but is elevated in recent times, “The seeds of a cynical culture were planted long ago, ready to flourish when the climate most favored them” (p. 72). Built up through the original Federalist papers and then supplemented with political polarization and various national tragedies, cynicism, according to Chaloupka (1999) is hard-wired into the American mindset. Similarly hardwired in the American mindset is American exceptionalism, which, in a dissonant manner, acts with and reacts to the political cynicism. The interaction of both qualities, according to Chaloupka (1999), exists for one to accommodate the other, “Think of our predicament...That society also learns to reconcile its tensions by imagining that its government possesses almost supernatural legitimacy at the abstract level of democratic values” (p. 98). This dual-existence of cynicism and exceptionalism as described by Chaloupka (1999) suggests that they have a positive relationship with each other- as cynicism increases, so too does exceptionalism.

Often rooted in the belief of American exceptionalism is an equally common belief in the American Dream. A potentially intervening variable, the popularity of the American Dream and the increasingly low likelihood of fulfilling every believers’ full expectation of it could be contributing to the growing cynicism with American government and politics. Wilber Caldwell (2006) explains that the widespread belief of limited progress and unlimited wealth only at the cost of hard work has led many, particularly the Baby Boomer Generation to be disappointed each time the economy turns stagnant or when they aren’t successful in moving up the social
ladder. The American Dream evolved with American exceptionalism, rooted in the values and ideas of the founders, “As the national experience unfolded, Americans came to believe that hard work, self-denial, endurance… paved a road to a better life, and that this road was open to all Americans” (Caldwell 2006, p. 41). According to Caldwell (2006), cynicism is a reaction to unmet expectations from the American Dream (often seen as an offshoot of American exceptionalism), suggesting that American exceptionalism causes cynicism due to low satisfaction. Though perceptions of the American Dream are not specifically measured or analyzed in the dataset used for this research, the data on exceptionalism, cynicism, and overall satisfaction should bring light to Caldwell’s claims.

Cynicism & Exceptionalism in American Culture (still needs citations)

Though not a scholarly work nor dedicated quantitative research study on American exceptionalism and cynicism, Allen Ginsberg’s (1959) poem “America” offers a unique contribution to this research as a whole. This study, at its roots, is based on the beliefs of the American people- their often negative opinion of politics and positive opinion of America as a whole, both existing in a manner resembling a national cognitive dissonance. Exceptionalism and cynicism can be dually conceptualized- once through a scholarly, in-depth description established by political and social scientists, and again through American popular culture and the opinions of the dissidents. Ginsberg (1959), born in 1926 to a communist mother, grew up with a frustration toward politics but a socialized romanticism of America and the way things are meant to be (Kramer 1969). Though his cynicism and distrust in government was ahead of his time, Ginsberg’s poems describe the dissonance that persists today, over fifty years later.

Along with other important dissidents such as Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs, Ginsberg (1959) fathered the movement to be known as the Beat Generation which would
emphasize rejecting capitalistic culture (largely due to heightened focused on the spiritual elements of the world, rather than the material focus of 1950s-era society) (Kramer 1969). Due to the state of American foreign policy at the peak points of the Beat Generation, many Beat writings are focused on the overly materialistic and oppressive nature of mainstream America. Ginsberg’s (1959) “Howl Part II” equates American culture to Moloch, the god of child sacrifice, “They broke their backs lifting Moloch to Heaven! Pavements, trees, radios, tons! lifting the city to Heaven which exists and is everywhere about us! / Visions! omens! hallucinations! miracles! ecstasies! gone down the American river!” (Ginsberg 1959). Written in 1955, “Howl” serves itself as a precursor to Ginsberg’s (1959) American cynicism for this research, something that becomes increasingly evident in his works, but does not extinguish his lingering American exceptionalist tendencies. While Cold War paranoia and an increasingly materialistic culture shaped the nation into what the Beats would see as a machine (Kramer 1969), Ginsberg’s (1959) “America” balances the typical American perception of an angelic America with his unease towards the industrial and nationalist mindset. Acting as both a love poem for the nation in the abstract and a protest poem for what it has become, “America” is a fitting demonstration for the push and pull of American exceptionalism and political cynicism over time.

Ginsberg’s “America”

Progressive and escalating in its structure, Ginsberg’s (1959) poem is most fitting to this research when broken into three sections, each embodying a different mix of American exceptionalism and cynicism (for reference, Ginsberg’s (1959) “America” is included in the appendix). The first section exists as a conversation between Ginsberg (1959) and what America has become, while the second is a blurring of Ginsberg (1959) and America into one, and the third is somewhat of an indictment of America’s wrongdoings that nonetheless ends with a
determination by Ginsberg (1959) to persevere despite it all. Within this poem exists the
cynicism- the perceived lack of action of the United States in offering compassion both
domestically and abroad, the exceptionalism- the references to and mocking of beliefs of a
superior America, and the coexistence of both- through Ginsberg (1959) holding both sets of
beliefs at the same time. Though it exists as an abrasive and opinionated piece on the condition
of America during the 1950s, it is both timeless in terms of American tensions and exceedingly
applicable to this research. By replacing a few words throughout, the poem can be equally as
relevant to today’s state of affairs. For example, by switching the subject of blame in Ginsberg’s
poem from “America you don’t really want to go to war / America it’s them bad Russians”
(Ginsberg 1959) to “America you don’t really want to go to war / America it’s them bad
[Muslims],” the poem becomes equally as relevant to the scapegoating that occurs today, over 60
years later. The enduring relevance of Ginsberg’s (1959) work and his themes of both
exceptionalism and cynicism support the idea that exceptionalism and cynicism existing in
tandem through push and pull is not unique to one point in American history and that the two are
constantly interacting with one another.

“America,” Section 1

Logically and structurally broken into three sections, “America” is somewhat of an
evolving argument between Ginsberg (1959) and the country itself, wherein Ginsberg (1959)
sees it as both amazing and frustrating. In each section exists a push and pull, similar to the
discrepancy of “America I’ve given you all and now I’m nothing” and “America after all it is
you and I who are perfect not the next world” in lines 1 and 16, respectively (Ginsberg 1959).
Written in 1955, the 1945 bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was still fresh enough in
Ginsberg’s (1959) mind that he can write in lines 4-5: “America when will we end the human
war? / Go fuck yourself with your atom bomb.” Despite the disappointment in America, Ginsberg (1959) maintains (or at least refers to) an idealistic version of America in line 8 “America when will you be angelic?” Rather than addressing the American people or the government specifically, he chooses to address the idea of America and contrast it with the reality of America— the idea of America (based on American exceptionalism) is meant to be angelic, meant to end the human war, meant to be worthy of its Trotskyites (who are American idealists in his mind), and meant to care for people both at home and abroad. Ginsberg’s (1959) poem, particularly the first section, focuses on the broken promises of idealistic America as well as American wastefulness and disregard: the use of the atom bomb, neglect of pain both inside the country (“America why are your libraries full of tears?” in line 12) and outside of the country (“America when will you send your eggs to India?” in line 13), and overall dissent of America’s disapproval of Communist beliefs.

The opening line sets up Ginsberg’s (1959) frustration throughout the rest of the poem, as he says in line 1, “America I’ve given you all and now I’m nothing,” putting into words a disappointment with hard-work not satisfying the American Dream, similarly discussed by Caldwell (2006), that most Americans feel. The lines that follow in the first section refer to and describe the many broken promises of American exceptionalism, revolving around the expectation of power and compassion domestically and abroad and particular instances where it is unmet. Ginsberg’s (1959) mention of “America why are your libraries full of tears / America when will you send your eggs to India” in line 13 vocalizes his disappointment with the effectiveness of the abstract American image that taught him to expect these issues to be handled. American exceptionalism, promising the manifestation of an ideal, powerful, and helpful nation, creates a frustration and cynicism in Ginsberg (1959) through not living up to the
expectations it has fostered. His repetitive use of “America” for every accusation in the first section suggests that this disappointment is not centered on particular organizations or entities, but rather the nation as an abstract.

“America,” Section 2

Switching style from the focus on disappointment in the first section, in the second section Ginsberg (1959) blurs the lines between self and country and relates himself to America before “becoming” America through taking responsibility for America’s feelings and wrongdoings. Literally, Ginsberg (1959) does not have Asia rising against him nor is he the host of a slew of prisons or mental institutions, and yet America and Ginsberg (1959) become one. This is no surprise, with the two most frequently used words in “America” being “I” (53 times) and “America” (26 times), demonstrating that Ginsberg (1959) is focusing on the self- the American citizen, with the abstract- the American image. Similar to Purdy (1999) and Chaloupka (2006), Ginsberg (1959) is suggesting that the American mentality of disappointment and lack of compassion is not only an abstract concept but also caused collectively. It is not the abstract America, that which fosters exceptionalism, that is run by Time Magazine, paranoid about China, and uncaring about the underprivileged, but rather individual American people collectively sharing a mindset. Flowing from Ginsberg (1959) the person, to Ginsberg (1959) as America, and then back to Ginsberg (1959) the person, and then combined with his references to exceptionalism in the first section, “America” communicates a relationship between cynicism, exceptionalism, and American culture, while describing where they exist: the shared mindset of the individuals.

“America,” Section 3
The final section of Ginsberg’s (1959) “America” combines his desperate pleas for restoring America to greatness, ending with a determination to nonetheless persevere despite it all. Though his references are mainly based on mistreatment of American socialists and communists, by naming individual instances of mistreatment, Ginsberg (1959) is pointing out times where he believes America has or will let him down. With references to people such as the Scottsboro boys (line 60), a group of African American boys accused of raping two white women and barred an impartial jury and fair trial, and Tom Mooney (line 57), a socialist convicted for a 1916 San Francisco bombing and denied Due Process rights, Ginsberg (1959) expresses disappointment with decisions within American government. A country intended to be angelic, perfect, and saintly is being begged by Ginsberg (1959) to live up to its expectations, by freeing the wrongfully convicted (Tom Mooney) and those denied a fair trial (the Scottsboro boys), among other things. Combined with the first section where Ginsberg (1959) is expected to feel sorry for being a Communist, his positive view of the Communist Cell meetings fulfills necessities he believes America lacks, such as compassion and empathy, going from “America when will you be angelic?” in line 8 to “America when I was seven momma took me to Communist Cell meetings...everybody was angelic” in line 61. In an area where American exceptionalism has disappointed him, Ginsberg filled the gap with the more “sentimental” and “sincere” option of communism.

The latter half of Ginsberg’s (1959) final section of the poem consists of him playing off of the mindset of American exceptionalism and cynicism. Reflective of Winthrop’s (1971) foundational essay describing an exceptional America, Ginsberg (1959), in lines 63-64, describes the United States as being a perfect nation for others to model their countries after, with only other nations at fault, “America you don’t really want to go to war / America its them bad
Russians.” Described as a nation of deflection, all of America’s troubles, both internally and externally, are due to Russia, China, the Indians, and so forth—according to the news media and culture at least. In a declaration of persistence, Ginsberg (1959) shifts the end of the poem from a criticism of the American abstract to a determination to continue on despite it all in line 73, “America I’m putting my queer shoulder to the wheel.” Again a demonstration of American exceptionalism (his frustration but perseverance through each instance of disappointment because after all this is America) Ginsberg shows that feelings of American exceptionalism occur in tandem, even if it is in a dissonant manner.

Methodology

This study utilizes data from the 2012 ANES Time Series Study, a dataset created and operated by Stanford University and University of Michigan’s American National Election Studies collaboration. The dataset includes results from over 5,000 face-to-face and internet-based interviews conducted prior to and following the 2012 presidential election. Because this dataset is a time series study, including both pre- and post-test interviews, several questions were given to respondents two months prior to the election and again in the weeks following the election. This study utilizes the data in a cross-sectional design and focuses solely on the interviews conducted in the weeks following the 2012 presidential election (the post-test). I will use Chi square ($\chi^2$) statistical test to evaluate relationships between views of American exceptionalism and trust in government, controlling for satisfaction with the federal government. For the sake of simplicity, each variable is coded as an indicator variable to differentiate between high and low scores. High scores were categorized by values at and above the median score, while low values were categorized by values below the median score.
The dependent variable will be *trust in the federal government*, used as a proxy to measure American political cynicism. The American public’s trust in the federal government will be measured as a sum score of 2 questions, categorized into three levels of high (≥ 75\textsuperscript{th} percentile score), medium (<75\textsuperscript{th} and >25\textsuperscript{th} percentile scores), and low (≤ 25\textsuperscript{th} percentile score) trust. Members of the American public were randomly selected for interviews and asked a series of questions (e.g. “Do you think the federal government’s powers pose a threat to the rights and freedoms of ordinary citizens, or not?”) about the federal government and major political leaders that measured U.S. residents’ perceptions of the trustworthiness of federal government in America (see Table 1 in the appendix for full list). Response categories varied by question, with some questions having a 4-item Likert Scale style and others requiring participants to rank their trust in government from 1-10, each of which were standardized and then recoded to compare means. As shown in Table 2, most (45.47) of respondents indicated low trust in government with only 31.94% and 22.59% of respondents indicating typical and high trust in government, respectively.

The independent variable, *American exceptionalism*, will be measured as a sum score of 4 questions, categorized into three levels of high (≥ 50\textsuperscript{th} percentile score) and low (< 50\textsuperscript{th} percentile score) feelings of American exceptionalism. U.S. residents were asked questions about the importance of American identity to them and the feelings associated with being American (e.g. “How important is being an American to you personally?”) to measure the public’s beliefs in American exceptionalism (see Table 3 for full list). Response categories were standardized and recoded to compare means. Respondents were divided on scores of American exceptionalism, with 59.59% reporting low beliefs of exceptionalism and 40.41% reporting high scoring beliefs of exceptionalism (Table 4).
Satisfaction with government will be used as a control variable to better understand the relationship between American exceptionalism and trust in the federal government. Satisfaction will be measured as an indicator variable by participants’ responses to the question “On the whole, are you satisfied with the way democracy works in the United States?” Response categories followed a 4-item Likert scale, ranging from “very satisfied” to “not at all satisfied” (see Table 5 for full list) were standardized to compare means, and then categorized into high (≥ 50th percentile score) and low (< 50th percentile score) satisfaction. Within the satisfaction score, as shown in Table 6, respondents reported similar amounts of low and high satisfaction (52.86% and 47.14%, respectively).

Hypotheses

Because public opinion is a large determinant in the appearance and functioning of American politics, it is critical to understand not only how Americans view themselves, but also their government, and their beliefs about America in relation to the rest of the world. First, based on the literature, I predict that as beliefs of American exceptionalism increase, American distrust in federal government will increase. Due to the nature of the founding of the U.S. and the early lack of trust in the government by the colonists, I believe an attitude of cynicism, or at the very least skepticism, is instilled in the mindset of the American public in a similar way that American exceptionalism lingers in American public opinion. Secondly, I predict that American satisfaction will have a mediating relationship between American exceptionalism and trust in
government, wherein the greater satisfaction with government, the weaker the relationship between American exceptionalism and government distrust.

**Findings**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure 1. Descriptives of Variables (Frequencies)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DV: Trust in Govt.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV: Exceptionalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>59.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control: Satisfaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52.9%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Overall, the greatest amount of Americans surveyed report a low level of trust in the federal government (45.5%), a low level of American exceptionalism (59.6%), and a low level of satisfaction with government (52.9%). These descriptive statistics align with the literature (Caldwell 2006, Chaloupka 1999) describing widespread distrust and dissatisfaction with the American government.

**Figure 2. American Except. By Trust in Govt.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Low Except.</th>
<th>High Except.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low Trust</td>
<td>47.9%</td>
<td>41.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium Trust</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
<td>34.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Trust</td>
<td>22.2%</td>
<td>23.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

χ² = 22.4, p > .0001

Before controlling for satisfaction with government, lower levels of trust in government are related to higher levels of belief in exceptionalism (41.9%) as compared to those indicating high exceptionalism and medium (34.9%) and high (23.2%) trust in government. The most prominent difference in the distribution of levels of trust between high and low feelings of exceptionalism is among those indicating low trust, wherein more (47.9%) indicate low exceptionalism and fewer (41.9%) indicate high exceptionalism.
Of those who are satisfied with government, more respondents have low trust and high feelings of exceptionalism (45.6%), as compared to those with medium and high trust and high exceptionalism (35.5% and 18.9%, respectively). In contrast, of those who are dissatisfied with government, more respondents have high trust and high feelings of exceptionalism (58.3%) while less have low and medium trust and high feelings of exceptionalism (37.6% and 34.1%, respectively).

When focusing solely on the relationship of high feelings of American exceptionalism and trust in government, while still controlling for satisfaction, there is a distinctive change in the distribution of respondents reporting high exceptionalism and high trust in government. Of those who are dissatisfied with government, 58.3% indicate both high trust and high exceptionalism, whereas of those who are satisfied with government, only 18.9% indicate both high trust and high exceptionalism.
Discussion and Conclusion

This research indicates that trust in government is significantly related to feelings of American exceptionalism, among the American public. Further, it indicates that this relationship is affected by American’s level of overall satisfaction with government, wherein less satisfaction is associated with more respondents reporting lower trust and high exceptionalism (as compared to those reporting medium/high trust and high exceptionalism). This lends support to the literature (Caldwell 2006, Chaloupka 1999) suggesting that feelings of American exceptionalism, when they do not live up to their expectations (as demonstrated by measuring low satisfaction), foster a distrust in the American government (political cynicism). The overall frequency of high and low feelings of American exceptionalism among respondents is less extreme than the literature suggests (Kohut & Stokes 2006), with more respondents indicating low (59.6%) feelings of exceptionalism than high (40.4%), while the distributions of trust in government and government satisfaction, specifically the majority of respondents indicating low trust and low satisfaction, match what was expected from the literature.

Although this research is primarily focused on high feelings of American exceptionalism, it is important to note that of those who report low satisfaction with government, the majority report low trust and low exceptionalism (53.2%). While a significant amount of respondents indicate high exceptionalism, the large amount who indicate low exceptionalism are themselves an interesting subset, as they are not necessarily representative of the typical “American mindset.” Age, education, and political affiliation may all be contributing to the amount of Americans reporting low exceptionalism, as well as whether or not they are satisfied with government (such as having a political affiliation that is not currently controlling government).
As supported by this research, American exceptionalism and political cynicism exist in tandem, interacting with each other and varying by overall satisfaction with government. A potential explanation for this is that heightened expectations from American exceptionalism (perhaps further encouraged by the government) are often unfulfilled, leading to dissatisfaction with the government, which in turn leads to increased government distrust, or political cynicism, though without a definitive time-order and control of all potential intervening variables it is impossible to prove this. Dissatisfaction as an intervening element in the relationship between American exceptionalism and political cynicism is additionally supported in Ginsberg’s (1959) “America,” as he maintains the perception of angelic view of America despite all of his political and cultural frustrations. Ultimately, the interdisciplinarity of this research demonstrates that American exceptionalism and political cynicism exist in tandem at multiple points in American history, evident through both cultural representation and through political polling, making them both key elements of the American political mindset.
References


Kohut, A., & Stokes, B. (2006). *America against the world: How we are different and why we are disliked*. Macmillan.


Appendix A: “America” by Allen Ginsberg

1 America I’ve given you all and now I’m nothing.
2 America two dollars and twentyseven cents January 17, 1956.
3 I can’t stand my own mind.
4 America when will we end the human war?
5 Go fuck yourself with your atom bomb.
6 I don’t feel good don’t bother me.
7 I won’t write my poem till I’m in my right mind.
8 America when will you be angelic?
9 When will you take off your clothes?
10 When will you look at yourself through the grave?
11 When will you be worthy of your million Trotskyites?
12 America why are your libraries full of tears?
13 America when will you send your eggs to India?
14 I’m sick of your insane demands.
15 When can I go into the supermarket and buy what I need with my good looks?
16 America after all it is you and I who are perfect not the next world.
17 Your machinery is too much for me.
18 You made me want to be a saint.
19 There must be some other way to settle this argument.
20 Burroughs is in Tangiers I don’t think he’ll come back it’s sinister.
21 Are you being sinister or is this some form of practical joke?
22 I’m trying to come to the point.
23 I refuse to give up my obsession.
24 America stop pushing I know what I’m doing.
25 America the plum blossoms are falling.
26 I haven’t read the newspapers for months, everyday somebody goes on trial for murder.
27 America I feel sentimental about the Wobbles.
28 America I used to be a communist when I was a kid I’m not sorry.
29 I smoke marijuana every chance I get.
30 I sit in my house for days on end and stare at the roses in the closet.
31 When I go to Chinatown I get drunk and never get laid.
32 My mind is made up there’s going to be trouble.
33 You should have seen me reading Marx.
34 My psychoanalyst thinks I’m perfectly right.
35 I won’t say the Lord’s Prayer.
36 I have mystical visions and cosmic vibrations.
37 America I still haven’t told you what you did to Uncle Max after he came over from Russia.
38 I’m addressing you.
39 Are you going to let your emotional life be run by Time Magazine?
40 I’m obsessed by Time Magazine.
41 I read it every week.
42 Its cover stares at me every time I slink past the corner candystore.
43 I read it in the basement of the Berkeley Public Library.
44 It’s always telling me about responsibility. Businessmen are serious. Movie producers are
serious. Everybody’s serious but me.
45 It occurs to me that I am America.
46 I am talking to myself again.

47 Asia is rising against me.
48 I haven’t got a chinaman’s chance.
49 I’d better consider my national resources.
50 My national resources consist of two joints of marijuana millions of genitals an unpublishable private literature that jetplanes 1400 miles an hour and twenty-five-thousand mental institutions.
51 I say nothing about my prisons nor the millions of underprivileged who live in my flowerpots under the light of five hundred suns.
52 I have abolished the whorehouses of France, Tangiers is the next to go.
53 My ambition is to be President despite the fact that I’m a Catholic.

54 America how can I write a holy litany in your silly mood?
55 I will continue like Henry Ford my strophes are as individual as his automobiles more so they’re all different sexes.
56 America I will sell you strophes $2500 apiece $500 down on your old strophe
57 America free Tom Mooney
58 America save the Spanish Loyalists
59 America Sacco & Vanzetti must not die
60 America I am the Scottsboro boys.
61 America when I was seven momma took me to Communist Cell meetings they sold us garbanzos a handful per ticket a ticket costs a nickel and the speeches were free everybody was angelic and sentimental about the workers it was all so sincere you have no idea what a good thing the party was in 1835 Scott Nearing was a grand old man a real mensch Mother Bloor made me cry I once saw the Yiddish orator Israel Amter plain.
Everybody must have been a spy.
62 America you don’t really want to go to war.
63 America its them bad Russians.
64Them Russians them Russians and them Chinamen. And them Russians.
65 The Russia wants to eat us alive. The Russia’s power mad. She wants to take our cars from out our garages.
66 Her wants to grab Chicago. Her needs a Red Reader’s Digest. Her wants our auto plants in Siberia. Him big bureaucracy running our fillingstations.
68 America this is quite serious.
69 America this is the impression I get from looking in the television set.
70 America is this correct?
71 I’d better get right down to the job.
72 It’s true I don’t want to join the Army or turn lathes in precision parts factories, I’m nearsighted and psychopathic anyway.
73 America I’m putting my queer shoulder to the wheel.
74 - Berkeley, January 17, 1956
Appendix B

Table 1. Dependent Variable Question Wording

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trust in Government</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Do you think the federal government’s powers pose a threat to the rights and freedoms of ordinary citizens, or not?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Do you think that [many] of the people running the government are crooked?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Descriptive of Dependent Variable (N = 5914)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trust in Government</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low Trust 45.47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium Trust 31.94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Trust 22.59%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Independent Variable Question Wording

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>American Exceptionalism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. How important is being American to you personally?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. How do you feel about this country?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. When you see the American flag flying does it make you feel… extremely good, very good, moderately good, slightly good, or not good at all?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. How important is being an American to you personally?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Descriptive of Independent Variable (N = 5914)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trust in Government</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low Exceptionalism 59.59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Exceptionalism 40.41%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5. Control Variable Question Wording

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Satisfaction with Government</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. On the whole, are you [satisfied] with the way democracy works in the United States?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. How would you rate the federal government in Washington?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6. Descriptive of Control Variable (N = 5914)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Satisfaction with Government</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low Satisfaction 52.86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Satisfaction 47.14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>