How America Compares

Rodney Tiffen, Anika Gauja,
Brendon O'Connor, Ross Gittins,
David Smith

How the World Compares

Springer

How the World Compares

Series Editor

Rodney Tiffen, University of Sydney, Sydney, NSW, Australia

How the World Compares provides an encylopaedic examination of social indicators from 18 economically advanced, stable liberal democracies. It offers important points of reference for political science researchers and students, and it presents a unique and accessible perspective for anyone interested in comparative politics. In nearly all countries, most public controversies and policy debates are conducted with a solely domestic focus, either ignoring international experience or using it opportunistically and selectively. People in many countries have beliefs about their own uniqueness – for better and worse – that are largely uninformed by deep knowledge of other countries. How the World Compares provides a much-needed backdrop to such debates, bringing together reliable data on the most relevant social indicators and comparing them across relevant countries. The core of these books offers data drawn from international organisations (especially the OECD but also from sources such as agencies of the United Nations and World Bank) and analysis, concentrating on the 18 affluent democracies that have the most in common. There is an examination of global distributions, as well as emerging global trends between the major powers in key areas such as population, economics, energy use, and so forth. Finally there is national data concentrating on the specified country alone. The first country to be analysed is the Unites States. The books cover as many aspects of social life as possible, from taxation to traffic accidents, homicide rates to health expenditure, and interest rates to internet usage. The discussion focuses on changes over time and comparisons between countries, looking at how the data relate to national debates about policies, performance and prospects, especially if these have been conducted in a vacuum.

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Rodney Tiffen
University of Sydney
Sydney, NSW, Australia

Brendon O'Connor
University of Sydney
Sydney, NSW, Australia

David Smith
University of Sydney
Sydney, NSW, Australia

Anika Gauja
University of Sydney
Sydney, NSW, Australia

Ross Gittins
Sydney Morning Herald
Sydney, NSW, Australia

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Introduction

America—the good, the bad and the average

> *We are surely blessed to be citizens of the greatest nation on earth.*
>
> President Obama, Democratic Party Convention speech 2012

> *... our pride and gratitude in the United States of America, the greatest, freest nation in the world—the last, best hope of man on Earth.*
>
> Ronald Reagan, a farewell speech, January 1989

Leaders of all countries find ways to celebrate their patriotism. Perhaps Americans reach greater heights of grandiloquence than most, but all countries nurture myths about their own uniqueness. Political leaders often use superlatives as a rhetorical invocation, but these are normally an expression of emotional attachment rather than an attempt at serious comparison.

Much of America's pride in its self-proclaimed exceptionalism grows out of its history, beginning with the foundation of colonies believed to be inspired by divine providence, the War of Independence, and the framing of what is the world's oldest surviving democratic constitution. For the next century or more, it was able to make favourable comparisons with Europe. Its lack of aristocracy meant that social mobility was more possible. The frontier society gave a sense of a land of opportunity, where both national economic growth and personal advancement seemed achievable. The large migrations from Europe created a dynamic society and a sense of people building new and better lives.

Of course, there is also a darker underside to this oft-repeated historical narrative of exceptionalism. But our concern here is how it affects contemporary understandings, whether the celebration of a rich heritage becomes a means of avoiding today's challenges and whether exceptionalist rhetoric is an obstacle to learning from others.

Patriotism can be deployed as a means of ignoring unwelcome evidence. In 2012, when the Affordable Care Act (sometimes called Obamacare) was under debate, Republican leaders voiced their opposition with comparative claims: John Boehner thought the United States has 'the best healthcare delivery system in the world', and his colleague Mitch McConnell put it in almost the same patriotic formula: the USA has the 'finest healthcare system in the world'. Unlike the general invocations of patriotism above, this is a claim that can be examined empirically, even if the makers of the claim never do so.

Similarly, the celebration can easily slide into boastfulness. President Trump told a political rally in August 2018:

> I want clean air. I want crystal clean water. And we've got it. We've got the cleanest country in the planet right now. There's nobody cleaner than us, and it's getting better and better.

Again, this is a comparative claim but one that shows scant regard for the available comparative evidence. But with the advent of Trump and the idea that America has to restore its greatness, another narrative of patriotic victimhood has become more prominent. On several occasions, Trump claimed that Americans were 'the highest taxed nation in the world'.

How America Compares makes comparison, and especially bounded comparison, its central purpose. If we compare the United States with Uganda, the Ukraine or United Arab Emirates, the differences are so overwhelming that few lessons can be learned. Rather in bounded comparison, we are comparing the United States with the 17 countries with which it has most in common. This of course does not mean these countries are identical with America. (It is a common fallacy for people to say two situations are not comparable when they mean they are not identical.) Rather, it means that these 18 countries have sufficiently similar political, economic and social characteristics to make comparison illuminating.

The selected countries have conquered—at least for the overwhelming majority of their populations—the basic struggle for life, so that their average life expectancy is close to 80. The bulk of their populations has access to good nutrition, safe drinking water and adequate shelter. All have close to universal basic literacy. All are among the most affluent societies in the world. All have capitalist mixed economies, with a strong public sector. All have been stable liberal democracies since at least the late 1940s, with constitutionally governed, largely non-violent political competition and different parties alternating in power while central institutions remain stable, and where the government is by some minimal standard representative and publicly accountable. In addition, a further condition of minimum size was imposed—that the countries have populations of at least four million. This criterion excluded Iceland and Luxembourg, which otherwise would have been included.

The aim is to compare these countries on a wide range of social, economic and political phenomena, to provide a sourcebook, where an encyclopaedic range of measures are brought together in one volume. President Trump's claim that Americans are the most highly taxed people in the world is easily disposed of. Similarly, measures of the cleanliness of air and water can be fairly easily agreed. Many claims are more complicated: How do you measure 'generosity' or the 'best' health care? However, as this book shows, a range of comparative indicators can anchor such discussions with evidence.

While the focus of comparison is often on the contrasts, just as illuminating are the commonalities, particularly when countries share long-term trends, such as the ageing society and the changing roles of women. There is an industry of politicians, journalists and market analysts devoted to intensively reporting short-term changes and sometimes exaggerating their significance. There is much less public effort devoted to analysing the medium and long term. So whenever possible, we not only offer snapshot comparisons, but seek to trace common or contrasting trajectories—whether all these countries are experiencing greater unemployment, increased health spending, rising crime rates, etc.

Such a procedure allows us more perspective on the extent (and sometimes the limits) of the change we have already experienced. More cautiously it gives us some, although a very imperfect, basis for considering future developments. The future is rarely a simple extrapolation from the past, but charting secular trends is one tool for projecting future scenarios, and hence for planning, and making policy decisions to give societies a greater mastery of their destiny.

Why compare? Comparison serves three major purposes. Firstly, it helps us to see ourselves more clearly. As Rudyard Kipling wrote a century ago—albeit in a somewhat different spirit—what do they know of England, who only England know? In social science terms, it allows us to delineate the individual case more precisely, to make explicit what might otherwise have remained unexamined. What we imagine to be unique may be common to many societies, while what we take for granted as the natural or only way of doing things may in fact be unusual or even unique.

Secondly, comparison expands our universe of possibilities. It increases our knowledge that there are alternatives—alternative policies, different institutional arrangements, contrasting cultural assumptions. Most policy discussions take place within a restricted frame of reference. Domestic contention tends to focus upon our hopeless politicians, obstructive trade unions or rapacious corporations, looking only inward when looking outwards can suggest policy and social alternatives beyond the framework within which domestic politicians are casting the

problem. Equally, while the focus of comparison tends to concentrate on differences and contrasts, commonalities are often just as important and interesting. When trends and problems are broadly shared among a number of countries, the causes are unlikely to be solely home-grown.

Thirdly, comparison is the social scientist's substitute for the experiment. We cannot subject whole societies to experimental testing, so disciplined comparison is one means for testing generalisations. The study of commonalities and contrasts allows us to be more disciplined in ascribing explanations and examining relationships. By charting similarities and differences, we can be more precise in our descriptions and more discriminating in our analyses.

While the potential value of comparative work is great, so unfortunately are the obstacles confronting it. One problem, common to all social science research, is particularly pronounced: many of the most interesting and subtle aspects of sociopolitical life defy quantification or the construction of valid indicators to summarise simply their trends and differences. There is often truth in the charge that comparative measures are too crude to be meaningful. We do not claim that the tables in the following pages exhaust all there is to say about the quality of social and political life in these countries, but they offer data that provides parameters in which such qualitative discussions can proceed in a more informed way.

Sometimes, comparing whole countries may not be illuminating. A single measure of transport does not take account of differences between metropolitan and rural areas, and average real estate prices will not show if particular cities are becoming unaffordable. In a federal system, states may have different election laws or taxes. A single measure of pollution will not pinpoint local problems. So, we need to note where internal variations—due to region, or class, or race—mean that a single national measure is not revealing.

The greatest problem in comparative work is equivalence. Different countries may measure the same concept in different ways, or what may seem to be the same indicator has a different meaning when put in its larger social context. To address these issues, we have, whenever possible relied on the work of international organisations whose professionals have made extensive and informed attempts to harmonise the data from different countries. The single greatest organisational source of data has been the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), to which all 18 countries belong.

We have also made use of international bodies, such as the World Bank, the IMF and the many agencies of the United Nations, especially when we have sought to also include a global perspective. In recent times, there has also been a range of commercial and professional organisations and academic research institutes which have produced valuable data. In this book, we are the beneficiaries of the expertise and professionalism that all these groups have brought to their task.

When international organisations publish compendia of statistical information, they are often constrained by diplomatic considerations to present their data in a neutral and non-controversial way. Sometimes, they are not reader-friendly. Sometimes, they make little effort to explain for the non-specialist the value and limits of the measures they are reporting.

In contrast, in this book, we have very deliberately exercised an editorial hand in the presentation of data. We have been selective not comprehensive about the years for which data is presented (trying to keep tables clear and making judgements about when added detail would add more clutter rather than extra meaning). Rather than invariably presenting tables with countries in alphabetical order, we have often listed them in hierarchical order according to the phenomenon being studied, so that the main ordering and differences between countries are more quickly apparent. (In such 'league tables', most people focus on rankings and differences, but as indicated earlier, what is often at least as important is how they have moved in common.)

Most importantly, this is not just a book of tables, but rather each page of tables is accompanied by a commentary about the meaning of the data, including sometimes a discussion of its limits. In this way, we have sought to provide the reader not only with reliable and pertinent data, but with some discussion of its interpretation and significance.

Each page puts America in an international context. Sometimes, this will confirm those who view America as the best. Sometimes, it confirms the counter-narrative of America as the worst, and just as often as these two extremes, it often puts America in the middle.

Abbreviations

H	hours
NYT	*New York Times*
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
S	Section
T	Table
WP	*Washington Post*

All other abbreviations are explained on the page on which they are used.

List of Tables

People and Life Expectancy

1

1.1 Global Population

The population of the world on 1 January 2018 was 7,444,443,881, according to the US Census Bureau.[1] This was an increase of 78.5 million, or 1.07%, over the previous year. In other words, the world is now producing extra population each year that approximately equals the size of Germany.

It took thousands of years for humankind to reach its first billion, which was achieved in 1803. It is estimated that the world's population was 300 million at the time of Christ and 100 million at 500 BC.

However, in recent times, the earth's population has seen much more rapid increases. From 1959 until 2012, when the population topped seven billion, the earth added another billion people every 12–15 years. According to the Nobel Prize-winning economist Robert Fogel, the increase in the world's population between 1900 and 1990 was four times as great as the increase during the whole previous history of humankind. Although such calculations are difficult, the best guess seems to be that roughly five per cent of the people who have ever lived are alive at the moment.

The rate of growth is now slowing. From 1950 to around 1990, it was above 1.5% per annum. From 2020 onwards, the US Census Bureau estimates, it will be below one per cent and from 2050 around half a per cent or less.

The further forward our projections, the more tentative they must be. Some predict that the earth's population may stabilize at somewhere near 10 billion. The United Nations demographers, however, predict that the global population will be 11.2 billion by the year 2100, or about half as big again as it is now.

Thomas Malthus famously predicted in 1798 that population growth would produce a catastrophe. Instead, the earth's population is almost eight times what it was then, and life expectancy has increased enormously. Malthus's crucial flaw was not to see the transforming capacity of technology, and he was writing on the eve of what was the most technologically dynamic period of history.

This population explosion is a testimony to humankind's success. It was the mastery of agriculture, the ability to live in cities, and reduce disease that made the increase in longevity and improvement in material living conditions possible.

However, success threatens to bring its own problems. Human activity itself now shapes the planet's environment, so that some people have labelled the current and coming geological era the Anthropocene, as the cumulative impact of people is the central driving force. There is more pressure on arable land, on shrinking wilderness areas and on the oceans. Humans have had to construct much bigger cities than anything previously contemplated. Carbon dioxide gases are generated on an unprecedented scale.

[1]US Census Bureau 'Census Bureau projects US and World Populations on New Year's Day' Tip Sheet CB17-TPS.88;United Nations *World Population Prospects, the 2017 Revision* (NY, United Nations, 2017);Robert William Fogel *The Escape from Hunger and Premature Death 1700–2100. Europe, America and the Third World* (CUP 2004). See also Alberto Alesina and Enrico Spolace *The Size of Nations* (Cambridge, Mass., the MIT Press, 2005).

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