

America the Unusual

John W. Kingdon

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Scholars have long asked, “Why is America different?” John W. Kingdon, a political scientist at the University of Michigan who is best known for his work on the voting behavior of members of the U.S. Congress, is a relative newcomer to the issue. He enters the debate with *America the Unusual*, a thoughtful and readable book.

Kingdon ably and succinctly summarizes the relevant literature before offering his own explanation of why the public policies of the United States are different in basic ways from the public policies of other rich nations. “I don’t want to go so far as to argue that the United States is utterly unique or exceptional. But I do think that America is very unusual among industrialized countries in many respects,” he writes. “Other countries provide more government services, pay higher taxes, and have larger public sectors relative to their private sectors. There seem to be a few exceptions to that general picture, but mostly, those are the facts.”

Kingdon’s argument is one of “path dependence.” The people who settled in North America and created what became the United States were more suspicious of authority and hierarchy than people elsewhere. Those beliefs dictated the type of political institutions they established. Power was fragmented—not only within the federal government but between the federal government and the states. Kingdon writes:

The American ideological center of gravity . . . was systematically and deliberately built into our unusual institutions. So the idea of limited government became a hallmark, not only of some sort of general American political culture but also of the very structure of governmental institutions under which Americans still live. Those institutions consequently make change difficult and reinforce the ideology of limited government.

Thus, Kingdon wisely avoids the trap of thinking of ideas and institutions as being independent of each other. One need not choose

either an ideological explanation or an institutional explanation for cross-national differences in public policy. The two go together. Without a prevailing ideology of individualism—or, at least, an aversion to centralized state action—the Framers would not have set up the institutions that they did. And without those institutions, government in the United States probably would not have remained as limited as it has. “This enduring and powerful interaction between ideas and institutions, each one reinforcing the other down through history, goes some way to explain the modern distinctiveness of American politics and public policy,” Kingdon writes.

Does this mean, then, that America’s politics are destined to remain the same indefinitely? Of course not. There has been change—indeed, at times, significant change. For instance, in the 1930s Franklin Delano Roosevelt presided over a large expansion of the duties of the federal government. But it does mean that change is difficult. Consider, as University of Colorado political scientist Sven Steinmo has suggested, how much more Roosevelt might have accomplished had he been prime minister in a parliamentary system instead of president in the American system.

Although Kingdon presents a powerful case for why America likely will remain “exceptional”—that is, why it will continue to have a government that is too weak for the tastes of social democrats and too active for the liking of classical liberals—he wishes that things were not so, and in the final chapter tries to conjure up possible scenarios under which a more “pragmatic” politics might emerge. He seems to believe that globalization holds the most promise in this respect. “Globalization . . . could be making distinctiveness somewhat less possible and may increase the similarities among countries as the years go along,” Kingdon writes. “As we continue the process of increasing global interdependence, we may find that we will not necessarily be forced to make a stark choice between American-style relatively unfettered capitalism with limited government and European-style social programs and economic interventions.” In short, a “happy medium may be possible if we are willing to consider pragmatically, in the light of experience, what works and what does not.”

That is the least satisfying section of the book. Kingdon has allowed his normative concerns—a desire for greater state action to deal with poverty, environmental degradation, and other problems—to cloud his judgment about the likelihood of such action. Piecemeal change may be possible, even likely, in those areas and others. But serious additions or revisions to existing programs probably are not—unless present institutional arrangements are altered. As Kingdon writes earlier in the book, “To block a proposal, a given interest group or

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coalition need only block it at one of several points (House committee, Senate floor, president, etc). To pass the proposal, it must survive all those challenges.”

Despite that shortcoming, Kingdon has written a very useful book. It will be of interest to scholars across the social sciences and, no doubt, will find its way onto college syllabi for many years.

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