

POLSCI 140-001: Comparative Politics

Paper #2

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Throughout recent history, the United States, France, and Britain have become some of the most powerful modern liberal democracies in the world. Each of these countries evolved through major historical events that forced each country to take distinctive paths. At the heart of these shifts lies the issue of overcoming traditional roots in race, religion, and immigration. Even though these separate the United States, France, and Britain respectively it is the method of getting to the modern liberal democracy that binds them. Through long history with race in the United States, religion in France, and immigration in Britain, each of these countries have overcome the traditional views on each issue with lots of pushback. With changing demographics and an influx in more powerful “outsiders,” traditionally dominant groups look to violent means to keep their country in the past. Pulling these nations through these roadblocks is the idea of democracy. With a more diverse population each decade, democracy becomes stronger and stronger with more voices being heard. Today, these modern liberal democracies face challenges of their roots in the traditional to the further advancing social cleavages and political institutions.

The United States of America is a country built on the idea of freedom. The land was built by immigrants and the laws were forged by the earliest modern democracy. With all of this being said and all of the ideas of a melting pot of languages, religions, and cultures, the United States has one social cleavage that is placed above the rest. Race.

The United States of America is the only modern liberal democracy that evolved from a path of slavery occurring within its immediate borders. Slaves brought from Africa were forced to live in America against their will, while their white owners chose to live in America. Even though this era occurred about 150 years ago, there are still many facets of slavery and reconstruction that have not been addressed. The historically dominant white population cannot see eye to eye with

a black man of the same class or religion. This disconnect is shown by constant struggles each decade into the issue of equality of race on a national scale. With all the help to foreign countries with similar issues, the United States cannot figure out the issue of race on the home front. As Dr. Andrei Markovits states in his October 13th POLSCI 140 lecture, “I would argue that in America, it’s the... race and ethnicity, which actually is more salient and supersedes class.” While many of the modern states of today's world are focused on class struggles, the United States has deep strong roots in the struggle of race.

In the past months, the issue of systemic racism in America has once again come to the forefront of media coverage and social justice movements. The equality among races is currently changing. Today, the United States demographics are much different than it was 10 or even 40 years ago. Since 1980, the white population in the United States has fallen over 20 percentage points from around 80% to 60.1% in 2019. With the major influx of Latino and Asian American groups, the white population has failed to grow over a decade for the first time since 1790 (Frey, 2020). This data explains why white citizens are expressing their dislike in new power given to “outsiders.” Even though the United States is a country made up of immigrants from all over the globe, the white population placed themselves as superior to other races during the era of slavery. As the black population rises to hold powerful positions within the country, even in the oval office, the white population grabs onto anything that they can hold on to in order to maintain their status in society. This comes out in violence against new immigrants and black populations.

The United States differs from England and France in its growth of liberal democracy because of the importance of race. No other modern liberal democracy, in fact, has the same pressure on race that makes it the most important social cleavage. Dr Markovits states again in his October

13th lecture, “France doesn’t have [slavery], England doesn’t have [slavery]... the United States does.” As American exceptionalism grows stronger throughout history, the issue of race has held back the true nature of democracy from reaching its purest form. Today, there are steps being taken to further advance liberal democracy through dealing with the unique racial issues of the United States.

France has been arguably the most unstable liberal democracy over the course of its long history due to the 5 Republics and countless constitutions. With all this uncertainty constantly hovering over the French population, religion became a *savoir*. Throughout history, there have been waves of religious freedom and secularism controlled by the state. This occurred until the latest, 5th republic started in 1958. Since this establishment, “religious practice has been declining in France and many other industrialized countries” (Powell, Strom, Manion, & Dalton, 2018, p. 182).

Traditionally, France has been a heavily Catholic state. There has been a consistent back-and-forth around religious freedoms from the times prior to Napoleon. From Catholic being named the state religion to increased secularism that banned all practices, France has seen it all. The instability of the regimes made it difficult for Catholicism to retain longevity in the population. Since the start of the latest regime, there has been a decrease in registered Catholics and a rise of separation between religion and political life. The new group of non-believers has grown tremendously in the last three decades. According to WorldPopulationReview.com, France’s population that identifies as “non-religious” has grown from 15.5% in 1986 to nearly 40% in 2016. This 30-year explosion has caused the traditional Catholics to cling to aspects of life that they can control. Most of these remaining Catholics have found reuniting in the far-right

radical groups. This movement was shown throughout France's policies in the intense opposition to gay marriage legalization in 2013 (Powell, Strom, Manion, & Dalton, 2018, p. 182).

Due to the far-right action that Catholics are associated with today, France has seen the rise of "anti-Catholic" movements. With such deep ties to a long history with Catholicism, there are grounds for a younger, more liberal demographic to have resiliency to the traditional ideas. According to a 2019 The Tablet article by Jonathan Luxmoore, "France is currently 'worst country in Europe' for 'secularist, anti-religious intolerance.'" Luxmoore states that in February of 2019, there were 47 documented cases of anti-clerical vandalism, profanation, burglary, and torching across France.

These movements show that France's path to increasing its liberal democracy is going to continue to be rooted in its deep connection to Catholicism. As numbers of Catholics decline, activity amongst them into far-right leaning political parties increases. On the other hand, younger secular generations are acting to actively remove the history of religion tying together church and state. Similarly, the United States, France, and Britain all have deep ties to religion but push to hold a secular state even though religion still plays a tremendous role in modern politics. The French situation, however, is unique because of France's long affair with Catholicism. No other modern democracy has had the relationship to one religion for the time that France has been involved with Catholicism. These demographic changes along with the active steps being taken to remove the connection between church and state have further advanced France's liberal democracy.

British politics have been halted for the most recent years in the issue of Brexit. What started as a misjudgment by the acting Prime Minister David Cameron, has launched into a

global crisis and immense pressure on the fate of the political system in Britain. Brexit however is deep rooted in the long-standing immigration issues plaguing Britain. From the beginning of settlement in Europe, the island of Britain has never really “felt” the same as the rest of mainland Europe. This was shown in British dominance over European foes all over the historical landscape. Through the small channel of water that separates England from the rest of Europe, British rulers have had strong defenses to fend off any advances made by their European enemies. These problems persisted all the way until post World War II Europe. With unity having a strong feeling throughout the continent, Britain looked to join the European Economic Community. However, as Dr. Markovits says in his October 1st lecture, Charles de Gaul, the President of France at the time, vetoed Britain's entry into the EEC (presently known as the EU) twice over fear that “Britain was not really ‘of Europe.’” Britain goes on to join in 1971 after Charles De Gaul dies. This would be foreshadowing to the historical issues showing in Britain today.

Brexit is a catalyst for the uprooting of a huge problem in Britain, immigration. As British people do not want to see themselves on the same “level” as other Europeans, it causes mass discrimination towards “outsiders.” This can be seen in the data around the most important opinions for the British people. “When New Labour came to power in 1997, just 3% of the public cited immigration as a key issue. By the time of the EU referendum in 2016, that figure was 48%” (Shabi, 2019). This change comes from the continued worry from British citizens, especially those a part of the Labour party, over the shrinking of available jobs to British citizens. Brexit is seen as freeing the British from potential loss of jobs to members of the EU. “Those in deprived areas, without much direct experience of immigration, felt ‘a real and perceived sense of unfairness’ over the [EU]” (Shabi, 2019). As a part of the EU, there are free

travel laws and plenty of equality among countries citizens. In the coming years, it is possible to see the United States of Europe come to power which would break any barriers to immigrants from entering Britain.

With a hold on to the traditional thoughts of Britain above Europe, Brexit is a way for the people to express their unrest for Europeans coming in and out of their country. The new modern ways of living between countries in the EU is too much for the traditional British Labour party member to handle. With roots in the closed off island culture of centuries past, Britain is facing major issues with returning to a similar way of life and moving away from the modern liberal democracies of the EU. Unlike the immigration challenges of the United States or France, Britain has had a long-standing history with keeping their island closed to “outsiders.” This history has become a major force in halting the advancement of democracy in Britain. With the new Brexit agreement deadline quickly approaching, the British people are being put in positions to halt all the progress that Britain’s democracy has had in the last decades.

The United States, France, and Britain have all had unique paths to reaching the level of modern liberal democracy that is in their countries today. While issues of race in the United States, religious practices in France, and immigration in England, they all share the common theme. Historical roots in traditional ideas push new “outsiders” away in the form of violence and political agendas. The one driving force to stop this practice is the rise of strong modern liberal democracy among all three of these countries. With the falling social cleavage trying to return to power, they cling to these traditional ideas which restricts democracy. The new demographics in all these countries continue to stop the restrictions and further advance their respective democracies.

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