

Translating American Exceptionalism: Comparing Presidential Discourse About the United States at Home and Abroad

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This study provides a comparative perspective on the ways U.S. presidents have communicated the idea of American exceptionalism for American and international audiences. I argue that U.S. presidents strategically highlight this culturally potent idea in both domestic and international speeches, but in different ways. To examine these dynamics, I content-analyzed presidential speeches delivered in domestic and foreign contexts since 1933. The study provides comparative perspectives on (a) how themes of American Exceptionalism have been used in domestic versus international speeches and (b) how U.S. presidents seek out diplomatic ways to “translate” American exceptionalism to communicate this potent national idea to foreign audiences.

Keywords: presidential discourse, American exceptionalism, international relations, public diplomacy

In his 2012 State of the Union speech, President Barack Obama overtly asserted his belief in American exceptionalism. Obama (2012) offered simply, “America remains the one indispensable nation in world affairs, and as long as I’m President, I intend to keep it that way” (para. 102). Throughout the speech he actively praised several facets of America’s standing as a unique and the greatest country on earth. He talked about the United States as having “the finest military in the world,” “the strongest economy and middle class the world has ever known,” and stated that “[o]ur workers are the most productive on Earth, and if the playing field is level, I promise you, America will always win.” Two months earlier, however, as Obama (2011) spoke before the Australian Parliament, such overt invocations of this potent national idea were absent. Obama spoke more about America’s leadership in the world than he did of its superior international status. He offered that both the “United States and Australia have a special responsibility to lead.” And when he did state that “[t]he United States remains the world’s largest and most dynamic economy,” he was quick to add, “[b]ut in an interconnected world, we all rise and fall together” (para. 35).

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Interest has been growing in the concept of American exceptionalism and how U.S. leaders employ it for political gain (Edwards, 2008; Edwards & Weiss, 2011; Ivie & Giner, 2009; Pease, 2009, Rowling, Jones, & Sheets, 2011). This article discusses how the notion of America as singular, superior, and even God-favored is pervasive in the construction and maintenance of U.S. national identity. At the same time, scholars often fail to consider the international audiences who are ever-watchful in this media-dependent and globalizing world. Relatively little research has examined how U.S. presidents have articulated American exceptionalism when addressing foreign, as opposed to domestic audiences. This is particularly important because although the value of espousing American exceptionalism within *domestic* politics is relatively straightforward, its utility in *foreign* speeches is less clear. Specifically, American exceptionalism comes with a built-in comparative component that suggests all other countries to be “unexceptional” in comparison to the United States. Politicians who feature such an idea in political speeches abroad must be aware of its implications not only at home, but also on the way people in other countries view the United States and its citizens. With two watchful audiences—domestic and international—U.S. presidents, therefore, must devise diplomatic ways to “translate” this provocative American idea.

With this in mind, I explore the dynamics of how U.S. presidents have sought to communicate American exceptionalism. Specifically, I argue that U.S. presidents strategically highlight American exceptionalism in both domestic and international contexts, but they do so in different ways. To examine these dynamics, I content-analyzed U.S. presidential addresses delivered in the United States and abroad since 1933 to identify how these leaders have articulated the idea of America’s supposed special role in the world. The study provides comparative perspectives on (a) how distinct themes of American exceptionalism have been put forward by U.S. presidents in domestic versus international speeches and (b) whether presidents offer diplomatic “translations” of American exceptionalism when addressing international audiences.

American Exceptionalism and Presidential Discourse

American exceptionalism has traditionally been treated as the theory that the United States has some distinguishable characteristics that make it different from, and almost always better than, other countries (Lipset, 1996; Lockhart, 2003; Madsen, 1998). Scholars across the social sciences have attempted to distill this idea so as to test it empirically. For example, scholarship has compared America with other countries on a wide range of national qualities—including political power (Lipset, 1996; McEvoy-Levy, 2001), economic influence (Hodgson, 2009), international cultural impact (Kohut & Stokes, 2006), and athletic performance (Markovits & Hellerman, 2001). This line of inquiry has produced a number of conclusions. First, some argue that *any* country, not only the United States, can be determined to be exceptional if it is allowed to select the criteria by which it is compared with others (Lipset, 1996; Shafer, 1991). Second, some have suggested that the United States is exceptional in ways that are sometimes positive (e.g., foreign aid) and sometimes negative (e.g., drug consumption; Lipset, 1996). Finally, others argue that American exceptionalism has passed, and that a “changing of the guard” is under way due to globalization and the rise of powers such as the European Union and China (Mason, 2009; Zakaria, 2011). However, while some continue to seek ways to prove or disprove American exceptionalism, I suggest that its conceptual importance lies elsewhere.

What is absent in these studies is that regardless of whether the country is somehow “proven”—or not—to be exceptional, the idea persists in American public consciousness nonetheless. In other words, the United States is exceptional in the minds of the American public not because it can be proven, but because people *believe* it to be true. It has become an idea that needs no verification, no tests. According to Pease (2009), American exceptionalism is a sort of “national fantasy” that inspires a sense of grandeur and uniqueness in the public mind. In his words, “the interpretive assumptions embedded within this foundational term have supplied American citizens with the images and beliefs that have regulated the production, transmission, and maintenance of their understanding of what it means to be an American” (p. 8). This belief is an essential part of the country’s collective identity and the way many people think about America in relation to the world, regardless of data or arguments in favor or to the contrary.

Historically, U.S. presidents have been tasked with leading the charge of fostering and perpetuating the idea of American exceptionalism for the American public (Domke & Coe, 2010; Edwards & Weiss, 2011; Neumann & Coe, 2012). Because presidents are seen as the human embodiment of the country, the American public looks to them to actively promote a collective sense of national pride around which the people can rally (Anderson, 1983; Neumann & Coe, 2012). Scholarship on social identity theory (Tajfel, 1981, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) provides a framework for understanding why such communications are so resonant with the American public. Specifically, this perspective suggests that because people derive a sense of self-esteem from their membership in their national group and country, they actively seek ways to paint that country in a positive light. If America’s image is bolstered, so, too, is theirs. One of the most common ways that people achieve this is by advantageously comparing the United States directly with other countries. This comparison helps people bolster their already-positive image of the country or national group. The idea of American exceptionalism, therefore, is a particularly potent type of national comparison because it both paints the country in a positive light *and* positions it above all other countries by comparison. When promulgated by a U.S. president, therefore, such a view is almost certain to resonate with American audiences because they are the beneficiaries of the social comparison. U.S. presidents, as a result, are likely to view American exceptionalism as beneficial to emphasize—and to do so frequently. Audience members and their country are directly and positively acclaimed when the idea is put forward.

A concept so one-sidedly favorable to the United States is likely to settle differently with citizens abroad than it does with domestic audiences. Like their American counterparts, foreign audiences actively seek to derive a sense of pride and positive self-identity by evaluating their *own* country in an affirmative light. In other words, when their country is exalted, so, too, are they. On the surface, then, the expression of American exceptionalism is not a natural fit for foreign speeches because it directly implicates the audience and in a comparatively negative way. Such an idea paints foreign audiences—explicitly or implicitly—as citizens of the inferior country in comparison to the United States. These audiences do not benefit from the social comparison put forward by American exceptionalism. One might expect, therefore, that U.S. presidents would be less likely in general to deploy such a potentially dissonant idea in these contexts. However, for two reasons, U.S. presidents are likely to feel compelled to communicate this concept to peoples of other countries, regardless of its potentially negative implications. First, the declaration of American exceptionalism actively appeases an ever-watchful home audience, who have come to expect the president to affirm their country’s exceptionality, an expectation that, if not met, can

bring harsh repercussions. Consider, for example, a backlash faced by President Barack Obama after a 2009 interview in which he said that he believes in American exceptionalism in the same way that other countries such as Greece and Great Britain believe in theirs. Such seeming equivocation angered many conservatives (Gingrich & Haley, 2011; Romney, 2010) and became a focal point of the 2012 presidential campaigns. Emphasis on this culturally resonant concept, therefore, is an expected feature in U.S. presidential rhetoric, whether the president is at home or abroad.

The second reason that U.S. presidents might feel compelled to communicate American exceptionalism to foreign audiences can be found in scholarship on social comparisons. Specifically, championing American exceptionalism abroad actively positions one's own group hierarchically above all other groups, a dynamic that stems from what Tajfel and Turner (1986) refer to as creative maneuvering in intergroup comparisons. The authors argue that there is a hierarchical structure within the community of countries or national groups. Each country's status is determined by how it compares to other national groups, and this relative status tends to be agreed upon, albeit implicitly, by the groups involved (Tajfel, 1981). Specifically, from the end of World War II and throughout the latter half of the 20th century, the United States became widely regarded as *the* global economic and political superpower. By 1991 after the Soviet Union had fallen, that global status was all but solidified. Notably, though, Tajfel (1981) suggests that countries deemed as hierarchically superior in social comparisons tend to exhibit greater tenuous or insecure senses of national identity because they are the target of competition from other countries. For this reason, the country is constantly tasked with asserting and reasserting its "superior" status. From this perspective, then, U.S. presidents are compelled to communicate American exceptionalism to other countries as a way to remind their competitors of their relative superior international status.

That said, when speaking abroad, U.S. presidents encounter the challenge of both asserting American exceptionalism while, at the same time, maintaining a diplomatic tone that does not offend or threaten the audiences they are addressing. Although highlighting this potent national idea serves to reaffirm America's status to the world and to satisfy ever-watchful audiences at home, aggressively doing so may evoke harsh international reactions. Presidents, therefore, must find diplomatic ways to "translate" this *American* idea to *foreign* audiences.

Types of American Exceptionalism

Research has only begun to examine the distinct techniques by which U.S. presidents invoke the idea of American exceptionalism in their public addresses. For instance, Pease (2009) examines how three recent U.S. presidents have employed this idea as an approach to forging compacts between themselves and the American public. He argues that U.S. presidents have highlighted the idea as a way to attract public support for their policies. Similarly, McCrisken (2003) argues that the five presidents following the end of the Vietnam War emphasized American exceptionalism as a way to restore America's image. More recently, Neumann and Coe (2012) examine a broad conception of American exceptionalism in State of the Union addresses. The authors define *American exceptionalism* as the invocation of the United States, or the idea of America, in political speeches. They further examine how U.S. presidents positioned the United States vis-à-vis other countries with regard to their position in the world order or their relationship to the United States as representative of what the authors call "exceptionalist tendencies" (p. 20). What is

absent in this research, however, has been an examination of the differing ways that U.S. presidents characterize the United States as being explicitly exceptional, in other words, the "exception" to the global community of countries.

Three themes of explicit American exceptionalism are common throughout the interdisciplinary scholarship on this potent concept. These *primary* themes of American exceptionalism explicitly invoke the idea that the United States is the one exceptional country of the international community of countries. These themes are neither subtle nor left to interpretation. They overtly paint the United States as a comparatively exceptional country.

The first primary theme of American exceptionalism represents the core of the idea, characterized by the belief that the United States is a *singular* country, distinct from every other country on the globe (see Edwards & Weiss, 2011; Heitala, 2003; Lipset, 1996; Madsen, 1998). In other words, this theme characterizes the United States as the single global exception. According to Heitala (2003), this idea of American uniqueness or singularity comes, in part, from the fact that the United States considered itself to be the first "new nation" because it was the first colony to gain independence. This meant that as a nation newly separated from European colonial powers, with a new style of government, the United States was simply qualitatively different—and therefore, unique—from the rest of the countries of the world (Heitala, 2003; Lipset, 1996). This idea was further reified by the country's more rapid development than other former colonies and its relatively rapid ascension in international relations (Madsen, 1998). From the perspective of American *singularity*, therefore, the country is placed on a set-apart pedestal where it is glorified for reasons and qualities that it alone possesses. For example, in his first presidential campaign, Barack Obama (2008) regularly declared that "[i]n no other country on earth is my story even possible," suggesting that *only* in America could someone with his unique background become president (para. 6). Furthermore, this perspective—which suggests that the nation is distinct, unique, and singular in the world—is the foundation of all types of American exceptionalism rhetoric, including the following two themes.

The second primary theme explicitly defines the United States as *superior* to all other countries in any number of ways. This perspective characterizes everything associated with the United States as fundamentally better, or grander, or "more" by comparison with the rest of the world. According to Shafer (1991), when the United States emerged from World War II as a global hegemon, many Americans began to think about their country as being ahead or above the rest of the world. This was further intensified by the fact that U.S. political leaders publicly lauded the United States as morally superior to Russia, the only other global hegemon throughout the Cold War. Lipset (1996) adds that while the idea of American superiority represents, in many cases, an overexaggeration of the core idea of American singularity or uniqueness, it is a comparative judgment that is nonetheless popularly employed in American discourse. For example, people in all ranks in American society often refer to the United States as "the greatest country in the world." U.S. presidents often employ this idea in creative ways. For instance, President Ronald Reagan (1981) declared that the American people "have fought harder, paid a higher price for freedom, and done more to advance the dignity of mankind than any people who ever lived" (para. 47). This perspective suggests, explicitly, that all other countries are inferior to the United States.

The third primary theme of American exceptionalism moves the United States into religious terrain. This component suggests the country has been chosen or favored by God or another divine power to play a special role in world affairs. In this view, the United States is unique and perhaps better because it has been assigned a special "favored" status on earth. According to Madsen (1998), the categorization of the United States as a divinely "elect nation" has been fused with American national identity since the country's historic beginnings. For example, the idea was central to the early Puritan belief that God had chosen the "newfound" land that would eventually be called America to be a "redeemer nation" that would make it a beacon for the rest of the world. In the words of John Winthrop, then governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, "For we must consider that we shall be as a City upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us" (quoted in McCriskin, 2003, p. 9). The idea of America's divine selection has grown and flourished in U.S. political and cultural discourses throughout American history (Domke & Coe, 2010; Heitala, 2003; Madsen, 1998). For example, President Harry Truman (1949) said, "*Almighty God* has set before this Nation *the greatest task in the history of mankind*" (para. 71, italics added). This element of exceptionalism provides Americans with the opportunity to assign their country a supreme status based solely on transcendent belief, rather than on tangible, terrestrial indicators.

Invoking and Translating American Exceptionalism

U.S. presidents are likely to employ these primary themes of American exceptionalism in distinct ways when addressing domestic versus foreign audiences. In the case of the United States, these themes are likely to resonate favorably with the U.S. public because each works to directly bolster, yet not threaten the image of the national group (Gilmore, Meeks, & Domke, 2013). This does not mean, however, that American presidents view all these themes to be equally valuable in political speeches: Certain themes are likely to be more culturally resonant and politically strategic than others. Although all three themes are likely to be prominent in presidential speeches, I expect presidents to favor the *superior* theme above the *singular* and *God-favored* themes when addressing domestic audiences. The *superior* theme in particular works to paint the country in an unequivocally positive light—as better than all other countries. The other two themes—*singular* and *God-favored*—are less likely to be seen as having the same appeal to the audience's national identities. On the one hand, the *singular* theme does not necessarily place the United States in a hierarchically loftier position internationally as does the *superior* theme. Although singularity still reinforces the country's positive image, it leaves open the possibility that other countries can also be evaluated as comparably unique in their own right and, therefore, does not reify the people's ideal of the United States as the world's *only* exceptional country (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). On the other hand, the *God-favored* theme in particular has the potential to be more domestically divisive than the other two. Scholars (Domke, 2004; Domke & Coe, 2010) suggest that Americans of lesser religiosity or from a non-Christian orientation are more likely to react negatively to *God-favored* themes than to other strands.

In the case of foreign audiences, U.S. presidents are likely to highlight less overtly aggressive themes. The theme of American *singularity* is more likely to be seen as less divisive because, again, it leaves room in the social comparison for other countries to also be considered singular or unique. In other words, although the *singular* theme is an active social comparison, it is not necessarily one that negatively impacts other countries. The other two themes—the *superior* and *God-favored* themes—do, in contrast,

necessarily place other countries in inferior positions. The *superior* and *God-favored* themes are likely to be strategically omitted from speeches for foreign audiences, specifically because such themes can be seen as menacing or divisive when communicated to foreign audiences. According to Hogg and Abrams (1988), foreign audiences are likely to see this type of aggressive social comparison as an overt threat to the image of their own country; therefore, they are more likely to react adversely. In light of these perspectives, I offer the following hypothesis:

H1: U.S. presidents are more likely to favor the superior theme of American exceptionalism over all other themes when addressing domestic audiences and the singular theme when addressing foreign audiences.

Another tactic that U.S. presidents can employ when addressing foreign audiences is to refrain from using *overtly* comparative language when invoking the primary themes. To be clear, all three primary themes of American exceptionalism are inherently comparative. Categorizing the United States as singular, superior, or God-favored directly places the country in a comparatively special position vis-à-vis other countries. According to Coe and Neumann (2011), by overtly comparing the United States to other countries, presidents can bolster the national identity of audiences at home. Such language, however, is likely to be perceived in other countries as unnecessarily boastful and undiplomatic. There are ways, however, in which U.S. presidents can make this comparison less emphatic. Specifically, a president might choose to omit any explicit mention of other countries when invoking American exceptionalism. For instance, a president may say, "The United States is the greatest country," but do so without adding "of all the countries on earth." By omitting the overt comparison, U.S. presidents may be perceived as being more diplomatic. In light of these perspectives, I offer the following hypothesis:

H2: U.S. presidents are more likely to employ directly comparative language when highlighting American exceptionalism in addresses to domestic audiences than addresses to foreign ones.

I also expect presidents to articulate American exceptionalism in more implicit ways, by alluding to the country's exceptional status, but without explicitly painting the United States as singular, superior, or God-favored. For example, instead of saying that the United States is the greatest nation on earth, a president can say the country has an exceptional role to play in the world (Neumann & Coe; 2012). In other words, these themes represent the global roles that individuals might expect the world's exceptional country to take such as being the *global leader* or as the *model* that the rest of the world should emulate. These *secondary* themes of American exceptionalism, therefore, are likely to appear regularly in a president's repertoire when addressing a domestic audience. In these cases specifically, I expect U.S. presidents to employ these secondary themes of American exceptionalism in a similar number and fashion as they do the primary themes. However, I expect presidents to take a different approach when speaking to foreign audiences. U.S. presidents should be significantly more likely to highlight the secondary themes than the primary themes when addressing foreign audiences. By highlighting these themes, U.S. presidents can claim the country's exceptional standing in the world without making an explicit national comparison with any other country. By opting for these more implicit themes, presidents can assert their country's exceptional status without sounding overly pompous or self-aggrandizing to their foreign audiences. In light of these perspectives, I offer the following hypothesis:

H3: U.S. presidents are more likely to employ secondary themes of American exceptionalism than primary themes when addressing foreign audiences.

Finally, I am interested in the potential alternative ways in which U.S. presidents invoke this idea in foreign contexts. With an ever-watchful audience at home, U.S. presidents are likely to look for other creative and diplomatic ways to assert and reinforce their country's exceptional status when speaking to audiences abroad. For this reason, I offer the following research question:

RQ1: In what other ways have U.S. presidents sought to "translate" American exceptionalism when addressing foreign audiences?

Method

To examine this theorized framework, I conducted a content analysis focused on invocations of American exceptionalism in major presidential speeches delivered to (a) domestic audiences and (b) foreign audiences. The data ($n = 856$) consisted of two distinct samples of speeches starting with President Franklin Roosevelt's first inaugural address in March 1933 and ending with President Barack Obama's State of the Union speech in January 2014. I collected all speeches from the American Presidency Project, which is the most comprehensive publicly available archive of U.S. presidential speeches.

The first sample comprised speeches delivered to the U.S. public. To construct this sample, I adopted Domke and Coe's (2010) definition of a *major presidential address*: (1) the speech had to be delivered to the entire nation, (2) the speech had to be broadcast live, and (3) the speech had to address serious national or international topics. The sample consisted of the following types of speeches: State of the Union ($n = 73$), Inaugural Addresses ($n = 21$), Major Addresses to the Nation ($n = 244$), Addresses to the Congress ($n = 13$), Nomination Addresses ($n = 7$), and Farewell Addresses ($n = 8$). In total, I analyzed 366 domestic speeches.

The second sample comprised speeches delivered by U.S. presidents to *international* audiences. I included three types of addresses. First, I identified speeches delivered to foreign legislative bodies. In these contexts U.S. presidents address elite decision makers of a given foreign country, one of the most direct forms of public diplomacy. Second, I identified speeches delivered by U.S. presidents at the United Nations General Assembly. Third, I identified opening remarks by presidents at joint press conferences with foreign leaders. These moments are heavily reported by international news organizations and, thus, are another major way U.S. presidents communicate with international publics. In total I analyzed 490 international addresses: 68 to foreign legislatures, 45 to the United Nations, and 377 joint press conferences.

I employed the same analytical framework for all the addresses. The unit of analysis was the invocation of *American exceptionalism*, which I defined as any emphasis on a theme of exceptionalism at any given time in a speech. Invocations were often sentence fragments. For example, in "I am very proud

to be a citizen of the greatest nation on earth," I coded the phrase "greatest nation on earth" as an invocation. Further, invocations of exceptionalism were often in proximity. For example, I coded two invocations of American exceptionalism when President Richard Nixon called the country "the *richest* and *strongest* nation on earth." The official codebook included two types of invocations—primary and secondary themes—operationalized directly from the interdisciplinary literature on American exceptionalism.

The primary themes of American exceptionalism derived from the literature were overt invocations of the United States as being *singular*, *superior*, or *God-favored*. For the singular exceptionalism invocations, I identified any instance in which a president said America or its people, government, ideas, or founding principles were qualitatively different from the rest of the world. Specifically, I coded invocations as singular when presidents, in reference to the United States, employed terms and phrases such as *different*, *unique*, *distinct*, *singular*, *only*, *first*, or *special*. For example, after the September 2001 terrorist attacks, President George W. Bush (2002) posed the question: "Will America, with our unique position and power, blink in the face of terror?" (para. 23). Next, I coded invocations as superior when presidents said the country was *more* or *better* than any other country, or the *best* on earth. Specifically, I coded superior invocations as present when presidents, in reference to the United States, employed terms and phrases such as *better*, *best*, *more*, *grander*, *greater*, *greatest*, *stronger*, and *harder working*. For example, I coded the phrase "The United States is the greatest country on earth" as *superior* exceptionalism.² I coded invocations as God-favored when presidents declared the United States or its components as uniquely chosen by God. Notably, to be included in this category, invocations had to clearly state the United States was divinely connected in a way unlike any other country; invocations that referred to the United States simply as "blessed" were not sufficient. Thus I did not code the phrase "God bless America."

I then determined whether any primary invocations overtly compared the United States to others in the world. Specifically, I coded an invocation as being overtly comparative if it clearly mentioned another entity in the comparison. For example, Reagan in his 1986 State of the Union speech said, "If the United States can trade with other nations on a level playing field, we can outproduce, outcompete, and outsell *anybody, anywhere in the world*" (para. 14). Specifically, I coded primary themes as overtly comparative if they mentioned "all other countries on earth" or "the rest of the world" or included phrases such as "in human history" or "of all time." Alternatively, I did not code them as overtly comparative if the invocation lacked any of these terms.

The secondary themes of American exceptionalism inspired by Neumann and Coe's (2012) examination of American exceptionalism in State of the Union speeches were expressions that referred to the United States as a *global model* or *global leader*. I coded invocations as global model when presidents

² While the singular themes of American exceptionalism form the conceptual foundation for the other two primary themes of American exceptionalism, each is manifest in presidential speeches in distinct formats. For instance, in the phrase "The United States is the sole, greatest superpower," I would have coded "sole" as a *singular* invocation and "greatest" as a *superior* invocation. To be clear, all invocations were coded as either one or the other, never both, so results do not represent covariation.

referred to the United States as a *model, example, ideal, exemplar, or a standard* for other countries. For example, President Jimmy Carter (1977) said that “America’s democratic system is worthy of emulation” (para. 14). I coded invocations as global leader when presidents said the United States was *the* leader the world in international affairs. Instances of this category included times when presidents referred to the United States as a *global leader, as leading the world, and as guiding the rest of the world*. For example, President George H. W. Bush (1991) said, “This is the burden of leadership and the strength that has made America the beacon of freedom in a searching world” (para. 62).

To assess intercoder reliability, two coders were trained with the same codebook and then proceeded to analyze a randomly selected sample of 10% of the speeches ($n = 84$), which, according to Neuendorf (2002) meets the required sample level for reliable intercoder results. There was a high level of agreement between the coders with a Krippendorff’s alpha of 0.91 for each type of American exceptionalism invocations (primary, secondary) and 0.89 for overt comparisons (Neuendorf, 2002; Riffe et al., 2008). All texts were analyzed twice: a first time for the official coding of primary and secondary themes of American exceptionalism and a second time to identify any potential alternative types of invocations of American exceptionalism.

Results

Overall Emphasis

I began by examining how commonly U.S. presidents have articulated American exceptionalism in speeches delivered in the United States and abroad. One might intuitively predict that, in general, U.S. presidents would be significantly more likely to invoke the idea of American exceptionalism—in any of its forms—in speeches delivered to domestic audiences than in speeches delivered to foreign audiences. With this in mind, I determined the number of speeches, at home or abroad, in which U.S. presidents invoked the idea of American exceptionalism. Results appear in Table 1.³

Table 1. American Exceptionalism Invocations in Domestic and Foreign Speeches by U.S. Presidents, 1933–2014.

	Domestic Speeches ($n = 366$)	Foreign Speeches ($n = 490$)
American exceptionalism invocations present in	68%	34%
Speeches with two or more invocations present	50%	17%
Average invocations per speech	3.0	0.7

³ No inferential statistics were computed in this study because I examined a census of both sets of speeches.

There are several findings of note in Table 1. First, the top row shows that U.S. presidents invoked the idea of American exceptionalism substantially more in speeches to domestic audiences (68% of them) than in speeches to foreign audiences (34% of them). Specifically, U.S. presidents were twice as likely to invoke the country's exceptional status when addressing a domestic audience than when addressing foreign audiences. Next, the second row of Table 1 shows that U.S. presidents were three times more likely to repeatedly invoke American exceptionalism when addressing domestic audiences. The table's third row shows this another way: U.S. presidents invoked the idea of America's exceptional status on average three times per domestic speech, compared to only 0.7 times per foreign speech. At the aggregate level, therefore, these results suggest that presidents have invoked American exceptionalism more often—far more often—when addressing American audiences than when addressing foreign ones.

Primary Themes of American Exceptionalism

The first hypothesis addressed the types of primary American exceptionalism that were invoked by U.S. presidents. In the case of speeches delivered to domestic audiences, I expected U.S. presidents to favor the superior theme over the God-favored or the singular themes. Alternatively, when addressing foreign publics I expected them to favor the singular theme. To test this hypothesis I determined the distinct types of American exceptionalism themes invoked in domestic and foreign speeches. The findings are shown in Figure 1.

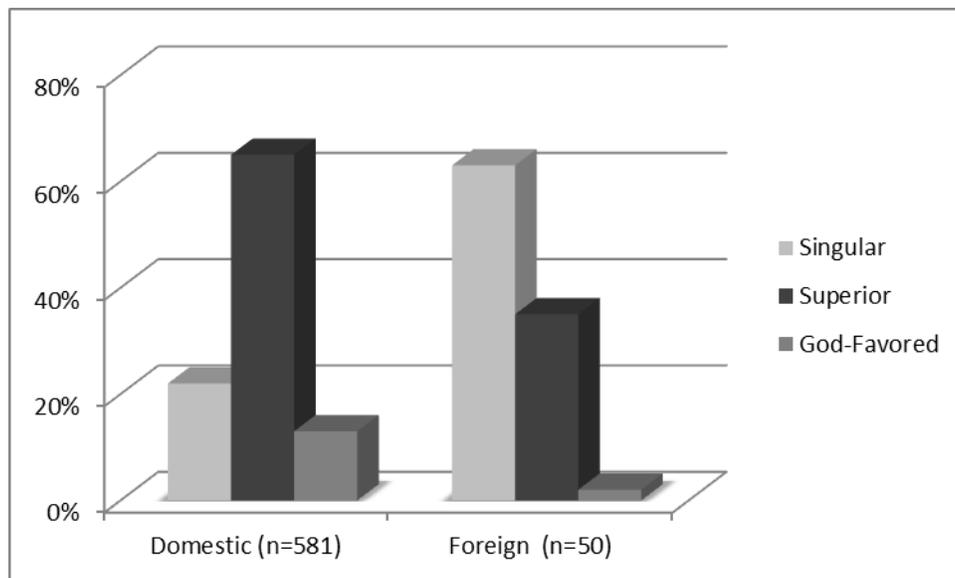


Figure 1. Primary American exceptionalism invocations in domestic and foreign speeches by U.S. presidents, 1933–2014.

Figure 1 shows that U.S. presidents actively favor the superior theme when addressing U.S. audiences. Specifically, the superior theme was invoked almost twice as often (65%) as the other two themes combined (35%). These findings indicate that when U.S. presidents have articulated American exceptionalism to domestic audiences, they have done so in a direct and strongly hierarchical manner. Such a rhetorical approach, however, was less likely in foreign contexts. Figure 1 shows how dominant the singular theme was when U.S. presidents addressed foreign audiences. Over 63% of all primary themes articulated in foreign speeches described the United States as being a singular country, whereas 35% painted the United States as being superior and only 2% as being God-favored. These findings indicate that in the fewer moments when U.S. presidents painted their country as exceptional when addressing foreign audiences, they did so in a way that was less explicitly hierarchical—and therefore likely to be perceived as less aggressive.

The second hypothesis examined whether U.S. presidents employed overtly comparative language when articulating primary themes of American exceptionalism. Specifically, I expected that when invoking any of the primary themes, U.S. presidents would robustly employ comparative language when addressing domestic audiences and would do so much less when addressing foreign audiences. To test this hypothesis, I examined the proportion of primary American exceptionalism invocations containing comparative language across the two types of speeches. Results are presented in Figure 2.

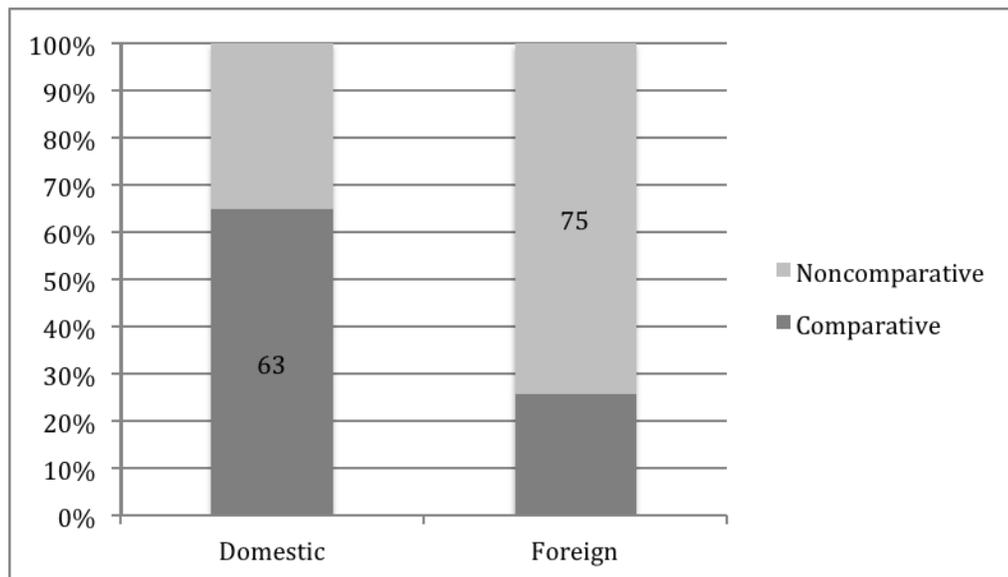


Figure 2. Primary American exceptionalism invocations containing overtly comparative language in domestic and foreign speeches by U.S. presidents, 1933–2014.

The findings in Figure 2 show that when invoking primary American exceptionalism themes for domestic audiences, U.S. presidents included comparative language the majority of the time (63%). In contrast, when invoking America's exceptional status for foreign audiences, presidents opted to leave out overtly comparative language, favoring the less aggressive tactic a full 75% of the time. U.S. presidents, then, were two-thirds less likely to employ comparative language when addressing foreign audiences. These findings suggest that U.S. presidents are likely cognizant of the fact that foreign audiences are apt to perceive such language as especially positioning the United States above their own countries.

Secondary Themes of American Exceptionalism

Next, I expected U.S. presidents to employ both primary and secondary types of American exceptionalism extensively when addressing domestic audiences, but when addressing foreign audiences, I expected presidents to invoke the secondary themes over the more aggressive, primary themes (H3). To test these expectations I calculated the percentage of speeches containing primary and secondary themes of American exceptionalism and then examined them comparatively. The results appear in Table 2.

Table 2. Primary and Secondary American Exceptionalism Invocations in Domestic and Foreign Speeches by U.S. Presidents, 1933–2014.

	Domestic Speeches	Foreign Speeches
	<i>(n = 366)</i>	<i>(n = 490)</i>
Primary American exceptionalism invocations present in	63%	7%
Secondary American exceptionalism invocations present in	52%	20%

There are two findings of note in Table 2. First, U.S. presidents invoked both types of themes widely when addressing a domestic audience, but with primary ones (63%) a bit more than secondary ones (52%). Second, when addressing foreign audiences, U.S. presidents invoked the secondary themes significantly more often than the primary themes. That is, U.S. presidents invoked secondary themes in three times as many foreign speeches (20%) as they did the primary themes (7%). Hypothesis 3, therefore, was supported. These findings suggest that when addressing a domestic audience, U.S. presidents have viewed both primary and secondary themes as similarly beneficial to invoke. In foreign contexts, however, the more implicit form of American exceptionalism (i.e., secondary themes) was viewed as more strategically beneficial because it asserts American exceptionalism in potentially less aggressive ways.

Mutual Themes of American Exceptionalism

Finally, a third way in which U.S. presidents attempt to “translate” their country’s exceptional status when addressing foreign audiences emerged qualitatively from a second coding session. This exceptionalism tactic is what I call *mutual exceptionalism* and involves characterizing another country as being exceptional in its own right, leading to an assertion of America’s exceptional status at the same time. Mutual exceptionalism elevates another country to the level of the United States so that both can be spoken about at an exceptional level. This emphasis, therefore, is well suited for an appeal to foreign audiences because it works to bolster their own sense of national identity, while safeguarding the United States’ own exceptional self-image. Examples of these invocations were abundant in the foreign speeches.

One of the most common “mutually exceptionalized” countries was Japan. For example, in a speech before the Japanese Diet (legislature), President Bill Clinton (1996) said, “As the *world’s two largest economies* and *two of its strongest democracies*, Japan and the United States must forge an alliance for the 21st century” (para. 7). Similarly, Clinton (1997) invoked a regionally derived mutual exceptionalism in a press conference with Brazil’s President Fernando Henrique Cardoso: “Because we have the *largest economies* and the *most diverse* populations in the hemisphere, Brazil and the United States have both a *special ability* and a *special responsibility* to help lead the Americas into the 21st century” (para. 16, italics added). Many times presidents elevated other countries by likening them to American democracy. In a speech before the Parliament of India, Carter (1978) said, “I bring with me the warm greetings and good wishes of the people of the *second largest democracy* on Earth, the United States of America, to the people of the *largest democracy*, the Republic of India” (para. 2). This potential inequality, however, was remedied when Obama (2010) addressed the same legislative body, saying, “I thank you for the great honor of addressing the representatives of more than 1 billion Indians and the world’s *largest* democracy. I bring the greetings and friendship of the world’s *oldest* democracy, the United States of America” (para. 1).

At the same time, invocations of mutual exceptionalism needn’t directly mention the United States. At times, such a claim was invoked in creative ways. For instance, in his address to the Japanese Diet, Reagan (1983) said:

To all those who lack faith in the human spirit, I have just three words of advice: Come to Japan. Come to a country whose economic production will soon surpass the Soviet Union’s, making Japan’s economy the *second largest* in the entire world. ... We believe that the currency of the world’s *second largest* free-market economy should reflect the economic strength and political stability that you enjoy. (para. 28, italics added)

Similarly, in a joint press conference with Prime Minister Morihiro Hosokawa of Japan, Clinton (1994) echoed this implicit mutual exceptionalism invocation: “As the world’s *second largest market*, Japan must be our strategic partner in efforts to spur global growth” (para. 7). By bringing attention to Japan’s standing as the world’s “second”-largest economy, U.S. presidents suggested that audiences should fill in the fact that the “first”-largest economy was the United States. Such creative invocations were evident throughout presidential discourse.

In a final step to understand mutual exceptionalism in the landscape of U.S. presidential addresses both at home and abroad, I examined it in relation to the other two types of explicit American exceptionalism themes, primary and secondary. Specifically, I tallied the number of all three types of American exceptionalism invocations together and then examined them comparatively to determine which were more common in speeches in both contexts. The results are presented in Figure 3.

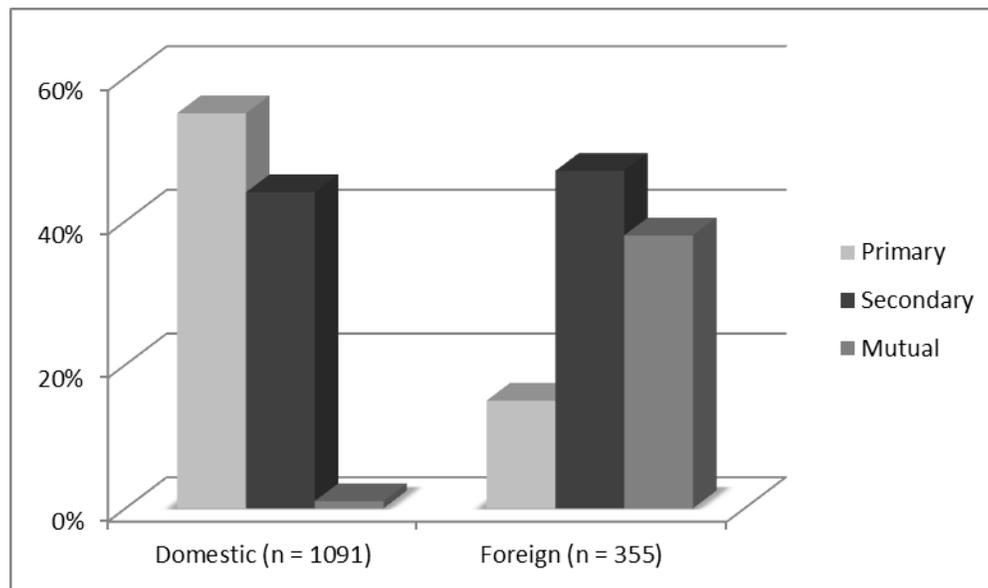


Figure 3. Primary, secondary, and mutual themes of American exceptionalism within domestic and foreign speeches by U.S. presidents, 1933–2014.

There are several findings of note in Figure 3. First, we see the centrality of mutual exceptionalism in highlighting American exceptionalism when U.S. presidents addressed foreign audiences. In these contexts, mutual exceptionalism was highlighted more than twice as often (38%) as the three primary emphases—singular, superior, and God-favored—combined (15%). Second, when addressing a domestic audience, American presidents have emphasized the primary ideas of American exceptionalism that maintain the United States' image as the only exceptional country. Third, U.S. presidents have invoked American exceptionalism in less assertive ways when addressing foreign audiences, highlighting secondary or mutual exceptionalism themes a full 85% of the time. These findings suggest that these two forms of American exceptionalism were viewed as more strategically beneficial or valuable in foreign contexts because they assert American exceptionalism in potentially less aggressive ways for foreign audiences, while reaffirming the idea for watchful audiences at home.

Discussion

This study provides a comparative analysis of how U.S. presidents have invoked American exceptionalism in major speeches before domestic and foreign audiences. I argue that such a culturally important idea, which positively elevates the United States above other countries, is likely to be pervasive in both domestic and foreign speeches, but in conceptually distinct ways. Overall, the findings in the present study illustrate just how pervasive the idea of American exceptionalism has been in U.S. presidential discourse for more than 80 years. It has become a mainstay in U.S. presidential discourse and is infused in the way that many Americans choose to view their country (Pease, 2009). The findings also suggest that U.S. presidents are well aware of the power involved in invoking American exceptionalism and they are creative in how they choose to invoke it. And while the present study contributes to the growing body of scholarship (Edwards, 2008; McCrisken, 2003; Neumann & Coe, 2012; Pease, 2009) exploring the how U.S. presidents invoke the idea of American exceptionalism for the American people and, to date, it is the first to systematically examine how they “translate” this very *American* idea to very *foreign* audiences.

The evidence of this study points to two central tendencies for how U.S. presidents articulate American exceptionalism when addressing audiences abroad. On the one hand, the results suggest that U.S. presidents understand the potentially divisive quality of highlighting such an overtly comparative idea when addressing foreign audiences. U.S. presidents employ American exceptionalism themes less often in foreign speeches because doing so involves trumpeting the country’s status over supposedly “unexceptional” others. There is more risk involved, therefore, when invoking exceptionalism abroad than in a domestic setting. On the other hand, even though they tend to employ more diplomatic ways in which to talk about American exceptionalism, U.S. presidents highlight the idea extensively in speeches delivered abroad. These findings support social identity theory’s (Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) assertions that U.S. presidents are compelled to assert and reassert American exceptionalism in speeches both at home and abroad as part of maintaining the United States’ image of hierarchical superiority in world affairs. In short, U.S. presidents regularly and actively seek to inform their allies and competitors that the United States is the world’s greatest, most powerful country.

Furthermore, the evidence provided in the present study suggests that U.S. presidents are aware of the fact that when they are addressing any audience anywhere, they are also potentially addressing every audience everywhere. That is, in this increasingly globalized world, U.S. presidents understand that they are never speaking to one audience in a single geographic location. Rather, in every speech they are potentially speaking to audiences worldwide. And ultimately, in any speech, in any country, they are speaking to and for an attentive American audience at home. In these international scenarios, then, the stakes are high. On the one hand, U.S. presidents must satisfy the expectations of the ever-watchful audience at home, an audience consisting of not only the general public, but of political adversaries, journalists, and an increasingly influential political blogosphere. For this audience, U.S. presidents need to project a strong exceptionalistic image of the United States to the world. On the other hand, they must also maintain a diplomatic tone so as to not create unnecessary conflict abroad. The findings, however, suggest that they walk this line carefully and creatively. For example, framing American exceptionalism in more implicit ways—such as secondary themes—works to satisfy the American audience watching from

home, with the potential of not seeming overly boastful in the eyes of foreign audiences. The tactic of mutual exceptionalism—discovered in the present study—takes this diplomatic tone a step beyond as it has the potential of meeting U.S. audience expectations, but without spurring potentially negative views of the United States as do the more aggressive primary themes of American exceptionalism.

American exceptionalism, in perhaps all its forms, is an idea that has been debated heatedly not only inside the borders of the United States, but in countries around the world. No country in the world is naïve about the hegemonic position of the United States in international relations, nor are foreign presidents unaware of the fact that many Americans believe their country to be greater than all others. Such competitive positioning in U.S. presidential discourse, which elevates the United States above other countries, is less likely to resonate abroad. It is possible that people in other countries even agree with certain assertions of American exceptionalism (i.e., the United States has the most powerful military and largest economy), but may not want to be reminded of their own country's relatively inferior status. And although the present study suggests that U.S. presidents strategically seek ways to highlight this idea in more diplomatic ways when abroad, people in other countries may also see such diplomatic language as condescending or inauthentic. Future research, then, should explore the distinct impacts that invoking the different types of American exceptionalism may have on the ways that people worldwide think about the United States, its people, its role in the world, and its foreign policies.

In contrast, when addressing the American people, it is reasonable for any president highlight such a potent idea in overt and unequivocal ways. This idea is at the core of how Americans want to think about their country, and they have come to expect such a stance from their Commander in Chief. The present study shows that U.S. presidents disseminate this idea with little discrimination when addressing the American public. At the same time, however, the potential hazards of highlighting American exceptionalism in the United States are also commonly overlooked. For example, the idea pervades American political discourse regardless of its links to isolationist attitudes among the American public (Lipset, 1996). Furthermore, the idea has been linked to other controversial U.S. policies such as the justification of Manifest Destiny (Hietala, 2003), the use of nuclear bombs in Japan, and the belief that the United States should be exempt from international law (Pease, 2009). It is therefore important to understand the roles that this idea plays in inspiring these and other potentially controversial policies in the future. In particular, it is imperative to examine if such messages might spur attitudes such as overt nationalism; discrimination against foreigners, immigrants, and tourists; a disregard for international laws; and even support for war.

Overall, this systematic examination of presidential speeches offers a number of key contributions to our understanding of the role of American exceptionalism—as an idea and rhetorical tool—in both domestic and international politics. Future scholarship, therefore, could further examine the distinct ways in which U.S. presidents have invoked American exceptionalism. Specifically, in foreign contexts, future research should examine the potential distinctions in how U.S. presidents invoke the distinct types of American exceptionalism in speeches delivered to the United Nations as opposed to when addressing foreign publics directly. In addition, an examination of the specific countries U.S. presidents are more likely to speak to about American exceptionalistic rhetoric might help to explain the motivations behind invoking such an American-specific concept to non-American audiences. Ultimately, future research

along these lines would provide us with a more robust understanding of the role that this idea has in political discourse not only in contemporary U.S. politics, but in international relations. In an increasingly interconnected world with ever-watchful audiences at home and abroad, it is more important than ever to understand the impacts that this potentially contentious and ubiquitous American idea can have on the sometimes-tenuous relationship the United States has with the rest of the world.

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