

One of the most influential social scientists of the past half century

[Countries](#), [Canada](#)



As commended by the Washington post on upon his death, Seymour Martin Lipset was a famed and celebrated American political sociologist. The study of cultural and institutional differences between the United States and Canada resides at the core of his work in the field. The commencement of his path to analyse the cultural differences began with his attempt to explain in his doctorate thesis, the conditions in which the first socialist government of North America came to power in Canada. His most recent work, "Continental Divide the Values and Institutions of the United States and Canada" reflects his research conducted over almost four decades. He possesses a collection of statistics on the existing and emerging cultural differences between Canada and the United States with a heavy emphasis on behaviors, political values, and established institutions. The highlighted parallels and contrasts are culminations of the formative period for the two countries.

Despite Lipset's substantial record as a political sociologist, it remains extensively debatable whether his argument on existing similarities and differences should still be considered relevant to society in its current state as compared to it in the 1980's. This essay, accordingly, will be an analytical assessment of Lipset's argument concerning today's society. It shall outline the stipulated similarities and dissimilarities as enumerated in accordance with society in the 80's, then probe into their ability to profoundly influence views on political science and sociology in society today.

In the Continental Divide, Lipset takes an interesting approach to a probable defense given the background of his work. The book is referenced thoroughly including a comparative approach to works by other historians, political

scientists, economists, sociologists as well as a pool of data from various public polls. Lipset evades the preying eye of political scientists who in the time of publication collectively concurred that a nation's analysis cannot be done on a stand-alone basis. From the notable amount of sources Lipset used, he draws a clear portrait of Canada and the United States and presents one of the best if not the most credible social and political comparative review available. The information accumulated especially through opinion polls illumines differences in the pattern of intellectual thinking, social attitudes as well as institutional arrangements.

Free trade, modernization, and influences related to globalization are the hallmarks of contemporary society. However, despite these characteristics that cut across all societies, there exist key differences between Canada and the US irrespective of both countries being in North America. These same contrasts are what Lipset has used to draw vital and valuable comparisons of existing and emerging cultural disparities between the two countries. Above that, this factor has enabled him to dive deeper into understanding and identifying other factors that explain the existence of cultural disparity. The underlying cultural differences can be demonstrated by principles of organization. For example, Canada's society is said to be characterized by law-abiding, group-oriented, elitist, statist and class-aware individuals contrary to the culture in the US which is primary shaped by historic developments and foundations upon which the American society is formed.

Differences:

The existence of both countries was sparked by the American Revolution but somewhere afterward; the cultures diverged and developed independently of what they are today. Therefore, it can be loosely said that the Canadian society affirms itself by following a path completely opposite in direction to that of the United States. It is almost like Canada made an intentional attempt to stand distinctively. Let's take an instance, American culture was solidly built on values upheld from the American Revolution as those embedded in 'life, liberty and a pursuit of happiness' while the Canadian society was solidly built on the values embedded in the counter-revolutionary values such as 'peace, order, and good governance'. An important facet to observe is that although two centuries have passed since the American Revolution and millions of immigrants come into the two countries; the cultures of the countries are still well defined by the patterns adopted by the founding fathers. Despite both societies undergoing changes through cultural and technological development, cultures in the two societies have not converged and are highly unlikely to converge. Lipset plays it safe throughout the book by changing his cultural determinants and takes an alternative approach, probably in an attempt to 'cover everything' that could be considered a cultural change trigger. He cites structural theories that give prominence to dissimilarities embedded in geography, population density, and climate and market size. He briefly throws light over economic lag theories where he argues that cultural differences will die down with convergence in levels of economic development and structures. He theorizes that unless Canada catches up with the United States economically, then the probability of cultural convergence is almost unattainable.

An additional distinctive difference being that the United States celebrated an oppressive government's era, the people's triumph and the successful effort to forge a never-seen-before government through the revolution; Canada mourned the defeat and a setback in the preserve of a government whose title was derived from a monarchy with linkage to the church. Because of this, the consequent emerging populations in both countries are divergent based on ideologies. The resulting United States society has its core creased with, ' anti-statism, individualism, populism and egalitarianism' whereas the Canadian society is ' class-conscious, elitist, law-abiding statist, collectivity-oriented, and particularistic' .

Further differences between the two countries are illustrated by the age old ' Canadian Identity,' an uncertainty yet to be identified. This is highlighted by historical experiences between Canada and the United States such as Canada being a part of the British North America and was, therefore, primarily against the Revolution while the United States fully supported the revolution and thus the US does not conform to that identity. The Revolution birthed the American society making the society a political ideology, termed as the ' Americanism' ideology which is contrasted by the lack of ' Canadianism' ideology. The United States thus gains its identity from the organization set up by Abraham Lincoln's ' political religion' and thus leaving Canada to try and develop and own a universalistic ideology that will match up to, ' The American Way' .

Another glaring difference according to Lipset is the differences in the principles underlying the foundation of the two countries. It is upon these

principles that limits to government involvement in areas such as industry ownership, provision of welfare and social services; and the regulation of economic behavior by the private sector are determined. In Canada, the state steers the economy through dominion creating a nation-wide welfare system. On the other hand, in the United States, the government's control of the economy is limited . US citizens are at disadvantage here since some basic rights such as health care is allocated based on the person's ability to pay for health insurance. Due to the liberation of the economy, the private sector sometimes functions poorly in the marketplace, but this is deemed acceptable almost superior to a public agency that functions well. Such are the repercussions of the American federal government's economic policies.

Differences in social attitude were revealed by an opinion poll that Lipset conducted. In this poll, the subject was Law and Deviance. The aim was to understand and capture quintessential differences with regard to public's respect for the law and those who enforce it. Large differences were revealed in the way gunslingers and vigilantes were considered national heroes in the United States while in Canada, national heroes as police officer . For instance, one of the questions implied that Canadians would rather live in an orderly society with less freedom advanced to citizens to avoid disruption. Another opinion poll indicated greater differences in attitudes over gun control, smoking, and other private behavior. Of great influence to social order within Canada were the Canadian traditions as they demanded to be upheld. Group rights and the collective good also greatly

influenced social order. These results were the complete opposite of the responses received from the American's who demanded full liberty.

There also exist multiple differences in higher education between the United States and Canada. What is astonishing however is the little attention accorded to education by Lipset regardless of the extent to which education influences culture. Addressing education there is a subtle mention of a former University of Toronto President, Claude Bissell and the Americanization of Canadian Universities. Americanization brought in a shift in the university's curriculum from humanities to more real-world subjects that also provided insight into professional training. Each graduate program received an expansion as well as larger research facilities. Differences in higher education lay in prioritizing welfare spending. The United States has the highest overall spending on education. There is incredible diversity in higher education in the United States when compared to Canada. The US spending is backed by established relativeness between education and economic growth. Lipset argues that a society, not rooted in a monarchy with extensive ties to the Church Establishment is more likely to be materialistic in defense of disparities in education spending.

There are differences in practices of evaluation between Canada and the United States which are symptomatic to differences in attitudes of the private sector. Where there is general suspicion over the public sector, there is a greater need for regular checks to enhance accountability for public funds. In the United States, for instance, institutional accreditation was a much-needed response to counter competitiveness among institutions to

protect the needs of the clients. Levels of commitment to the notion of equality vary between the two countries with the US registering higher levels of poverty, relatively low levels of welfare support and greater levels of disparity in wealth and income distribution. Canada is more committed to wealth redistribution and registers higher levels of wealth concentration. Class consciousness within Canada is much greater than in the US.

Similarities:

Although there are definite differences between the two countries, there also exist similarities. These similarities are a slow process by Canada to become like the US. In this process, Canada has gained lots of knowledge from the US picking out what is beneficial to it and leaving out clear paths of peril.

Another similarity is that both Canada and the US are committed to facets of equality; the US, however, is more extravagant in this notion. In the US, the Constitution and Bill of Rights always protected individuals from possible state encroachment. Canada's traditions which were over emphasized on the social order curtailed individual freedom and liberty. Currently, Canada has a Charter of Rights and Freedoms which carries some similarities to the U. S. Bill of Rights proving that Canada has learned from the United States. Since Canada developed much later after the US, it can pick up US traits in hindsight, and the country is slowly embracing the age-old slogan, "American Way."

Lipset's argument relevance to today's society:

Despite incredible data gathering and subsequent analysis, Lipset's argument is barely valid to the current society. It suffers from all the problems of authoritarianism and functionalism. Functionalism is however not a prediction or an explanation but an efficient way to tell a description. His argument fails at explaining the result and the steps that follow beyond the understanding of work. Lipset gives no mention of elementary or secondary education and throws in a few brief statements about higher education. This is a significant omission because educational institutions shape the culture for many institutions as it is a place of cultural exchange.

Alton argues that reducing the current discussion of analyzing cultures to just two countries is quite unfortunate and disadvantages the hypothesis. Alton applauds the original thesis by Lipset where he uses four countries to carry out his study thereby expanding the range of comparable results. It is flawed to compare just two countries who only share a revolution and a continent, therefore not compatible with comparable means to establish cultural differences.

Lipset creates a puzzle by convincingly demonstrating that cultural differences are persistent. He asserts that these differences can exist for a long period regardless of changes in social culture. This is where Lipset fails at functionalism by assuming that he has explained all that is there to explain. In modern day society assertion would not work as there is an incredible influx of people from all over the world into North America each year. How Canadians or Americans selectively adopt habits passed down from the founding fathers beats logic. It is not an acculturation success

achieved by media since Anglophone Canadians watch TV for about 50% of their time and there are always American programs on TV . Line up neither in school; history classes teach about General Washington over General Montcalm or in immigrant arrangement . Therefore, I am of the mind that in the modern day, Lipset's opinions on cultural differences would not be relevant as everything surrounding any culture is slowly pushing for convergence.