

AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM REVISITED

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It has become an article of faith that America sees itself as an “exceptional” nation, best suited to run the world. But a massive online survey uncovers surprising data that show English-speaking respondents outside the US are more likely than Americans to see their home country as most capable of global leadership.

Selon la thèse de l’« exceptionnalisme américain », les États-Unis se perçoivent comme le pays le mieux apte à gouverner le monde. Mais étonnamment, un vaste sondage en ligne révèle que les anglophones hors des États-Unis sont plus susceptibles que les Américains de juger leur propre pays capable d’exercer un leadership mondial.

In his 1952 book *The Irony of American History*, Reinhold Niebuhr warned that American decline, should it come, would be attributable to collective vainglory. National vainglory is ostentatious pride, bigheadedness, self-perceived exceptionalism. It is a smugness and an aura of self-importance that irritates others and causes the rest of the world to believe that people from your country want to run the world. It was Plato’s contention that believing you’re virtuous and wise should make you want to run things, and that the competent have an obligation to preside over others. A sense has taken hold in much of the world that this is what Americans believe about themselves, a conviction in an American exceptionalism that either offers the promise of a better world or lies at the root of the globe’s gravest problems.

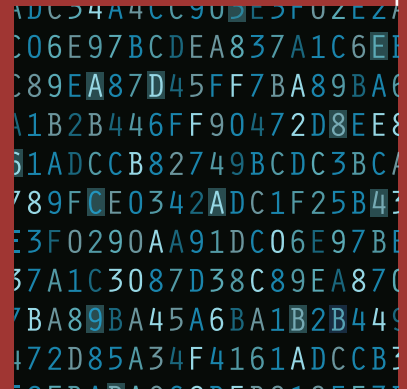
There were more than 1.3 million references in a recent search on Google for “American exceptionalism,” a term that gained popularity with the publication in 1996 of the

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seminal book on the topic by political scientist Seymour Martin Lipset. Since that time, and especially following the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, there have been thousands of television talk-show references to the term. While the term may have divergent definitions, they all stem from Lipset’s broader idea of a uniquely American ideology, “Americanism,” based on liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, republicanism, populism, and laissez-faire values.

Prominent neoconservative interpretations of Lipset’s observations later figured in the essays by James Q. Wilson, Norman Podhoretz, and Roger Scruton in the 2006 series on the topic in the *American Spectator*. In September 2012, Senator John McCain took umbrage at President Obama, saying on Fox News that “this president does not believe in American exceptionalism.” McCain took offence at the Obama administration’s alleged reluctance to wage war and its commitment, instead, to “leading from behind.” The implication was that if you accept that you are the best of the best, you need to show assertive leadership. Plato would have seconded that.

There were, however, relatively few data to show that Americans considered themselves exceptional as compared with others. We found no multi-country data sources. A



2010 national Gallup survey of 1,019 US adults found that 73 percent, across all political parties, agreed with the observation that “the United States has a unique character because of its history and Constitution that sets it apart from other nations as the greatest in the world.” Agreement was most prevalent among self-declared Republicans (91 percent). But there were few data to show that this view was unique to Americans, or to compare how people in other countries felt about whether their own values should be universally embraced.

Now, new data-capture technology has given us a chance to fill in those blanks. By enabling us to reach broadly and deeply across countries in search of answers to a question, the technology has enabled us to obtain new multi-country data that stand these perceptions on end. In this case, we posed one prompt to more than 18,000 English-speakers from around the world: “The world would be better if it were run by people from my country.”

The responses challenge conventional wisdom about American exceptionalism: surprisingly, we found Americans weren’t intent on running the world. This is an important indication that the traditional assumption that Americans see themselves as chosen stewards of the planet may need to be reconsidered. It may be time to rethink the popular image of the vainglorious American.

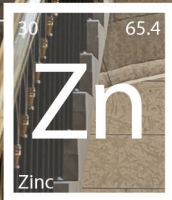
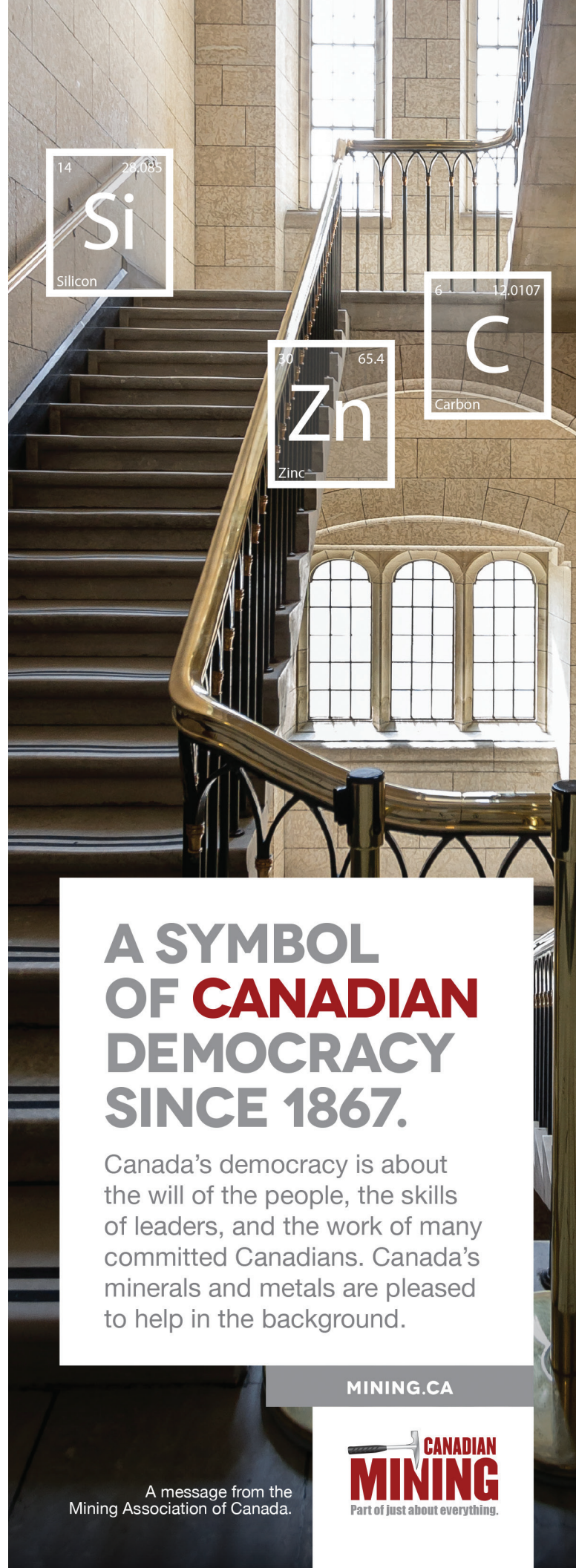
We did not know what to expect when we first decided to check the reality behind the “congenial truth” implicit in Senator McCain’s oft-quoted 2012 observation about US exceptionalism. As journalist Bill Fox, Prime Minister Brian Mulroney’s press secretary and director of communications from 1984 to 1987, wrote in 1999 in *Spinwars: Politics and New Media*:

Congenial truths can take hold even in circumstances where the truth is not sustained by facts. In fact, ‘congenial truth,’ when combined with theories of dominant media frames, creates a version of truth far removed from reality.

We conducted the survey using RIWI technology, RIWI being a “cloud”-based global technology company that is able to capture data from respondents anywhere in the world where Web-enabled devices exist, at the same time. The data were anonymous and complied with all privacy legislation. The number of respondents from different countries corresponds with the frequency of Web usage in the country. The data were then reweighted to reflect known gender and age distributions. (Details on RIWI’s proprietary technology and examples of what global attitudinal data capture have revealed in other contexts can be found at <http://riwi.com>.)

Between May 24 and July 11 this year, 6,276 English-speaking adult US respondents, segmented by age and gender and state, responded to the prompt. Possible answers were: “Yes,” “No,” and “Don’t know/Don’t care.” During the same time frame, 12,133 responses were gathered from English-speaking adults around the world, outside US borders.

As shown in figure 1, 38.8 ± 2 percent of US-based adults answered, “Yes,” while 51.4 ± 2 percent of adults from outside



A SYMBOL OF **CANADIAN** DEMOCRACY SINCE 1867.

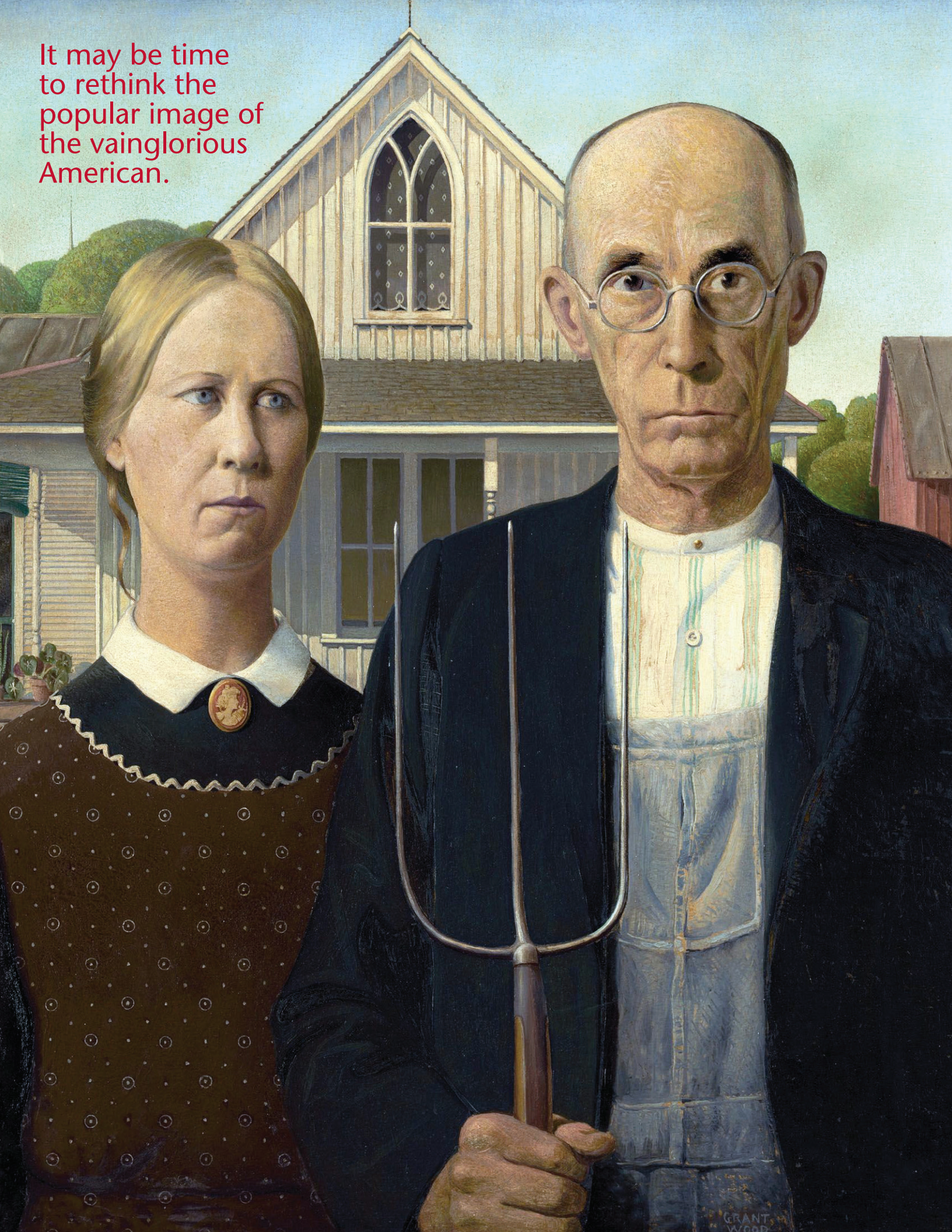
Canada’s democracy is about the will of the people, the skills of leaders, and the work of many committed Canadians. Canada’s minerals and metals are pleased to help in the background.

MINING.CA



A message from the Mining Association of Canada.

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the US answered “Yes.” The percentage difference is statistically significant at the $p < 0.05$ level; the standard deviation (which measures the spread of all data from the average of the two groups) is 6.3.

The RIWI methodology, called random domain intercept technology, is a Canadian innovation. It differs from random digit dialing or crowd-sourcing of blogs and social media content. And it is different from both probability- and nonprobability-based survey panel data, where respondents are rewarded with cash or sweepstakes or other rewards. RIWI prompts come on full-page websites served up to the user rapidly when he/she types in, by error, a randomized URL that does not exist, which is a ubiquitous occurrence on every browser and device in every country and territory in the world.

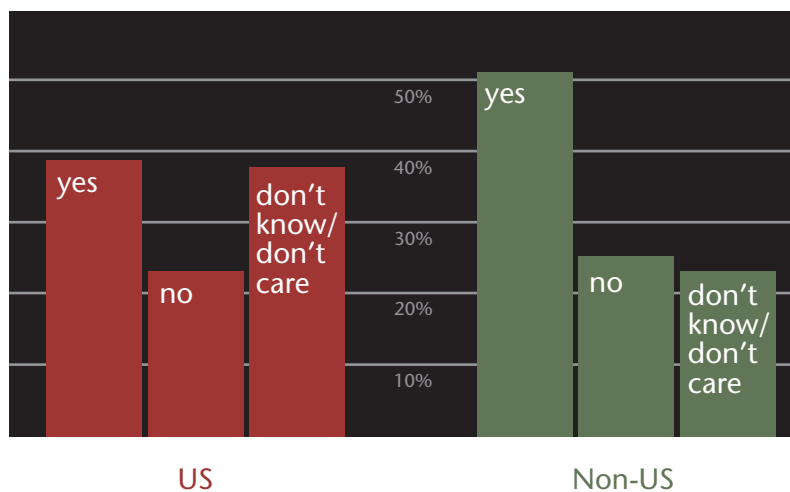
The method makes RIWI unique in its global reach, in the non-incented and random nature of the respondents (most of whom rarely if ever answer surveys), and by the fact that the only thing motivating people to respond to these random prompts or “nano-surveys” is what is often referred to by social science researchers as “topic salience” — that is, is this topic of interest or not? Only if the answer to this is “Yes” will the question be answered.

In our research on exceptionalism, it is key to understand that only English speakers answered the prompts and, as such, they do not necessarily represent the majority in non-English speaking countries. The overwhelming bias of Web users globally is English (the majority of all websites are in English only and domain names, or URLs, are typically in English characters), and it was, we felt, important to keep the language consistent to enable meaningful statistical comparisons. Respondents answering from country X could conceivably be citizens of a different country. We ran the statistics again, comparing the US with the five major English-speaking countries — India, Pakistan, the United Kingdom, Phil-

FIGURE 1.
GLOBAL PERCEPTIONS OF US EXCEPTIONALISM,
MAY 24-JULY 11, 2014

“The world would be better if it were run by people from my country.”

SD = 6.3 N = 18,409



ippines and Germany. We still found that Americans, at 38.8 ± 2 -percent “Yes,” compare favourably with the other predominantly English-speaking populations, whose combined “Yes” average was 50.3 ± 2 percent.

It is also important to understand that each of the three responses, “Yes,” “No,” and “Don’t know/Don’t care” could have several meanings. “Yes” could be an endorsement of the respondent country’s current government — “It’s doing a good job here, so why not rule the world?” the reasoning would go. Or it could be an endorsement of national values — democracy, freedom of religion, freedom of choice, gender equality, or the pursuit of individual goals. Or, more likely, since values overlap considerably among the nations of the world, “Yes” might mean the sort of chauvinism that leads to the belief in superior competence — a greater ability to achieve peace and stability, a greater ability to conquer poverty and inequality.

AMERICAN GOTHIC, BY GRANT WOOD,
ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

Americans may be more aware than others of their responsibility as members of a community of nations.

We tried to better understand the meaning of “Yes” by comparing the responses of Red states (Republican) and Blue states (Democrat) in the US, characterized according to voting patterns in the 2012 elections. We were no further ahead because there was no statistically significant difference between the two groups of states in their aggregate “Yes,” “No,” and “Don’t know/Don’t care” responses.

A “No” response also lends itself to several meanings. Preferring limited hegemony of one’s own nation over other nations could stem from humility or from an appreciation of difference. It could signal a belief in the superior merit of other peoples, or disapproval of one’s current leaders. Other interpretations are also possible. Not wishing to assume power over others has many potential motives. By way of historical illustration, the transition in imperial strategy by the British Empire in the early 20th century from colonial occupation to administration by proxy through the establishment of protectorates reflected not only conflict fatigue after a period of sustained and costly campaigns of force but also a growing popular indifference to the project of territorial acquisition or empire.

The “I don’t know/Don’t care” response is not straightforward either. Plato, again, is pertinent here. In

Phaedo, he talks about misology, described as a weariness to commit to further argument. This sort of fatigue appearing during debate often emerges when a dearly held belief is proven false. Political agnosticism could thus be a case of misology: “My idols have proven to have feet of clay. I give up. I don’t care anymore.” Or it could simply mean what it says at face value — “I really don’t know enough about what makes for good government to be able to answer this question.”

It is important to observe that, in all likelihood, all respondents exposed to the prompt instinctively understood the question against the backdrop of the dominant international influence of the US. The question cannot be interpreted in a vacuum, without considering current US global influence — military, political, and economic.

Keeping all the foregoing caveats in mind, the data raise some intriguing questions about what we believe to be true about American exceptionalism. Contrary to popular belief, Americans may be less certain that they should run the world than respondents from other English speaking countries. And that leads us to wonder why. Do they see themselves as less qualified, or less able than others would be? Or are they weary of trying to be “all things to all people,” as reflected in the high “I don’t know/Don’t care” response? Could this

be a contemporary quirk, a reflection of Washington’s current political gridlock?

Another, more positive spin on these results is also possible. Americans may be exceptional not because they think themselves superior to others, but because they consider themselves as one with others, as a vital part of a larger whole. This perspective has sometimes been called cosmopolitanism, or the adoption of a global worldview based on common values, mutual respect and a shared economic relationship. The Roman philosopher-emperor Marcus Aurelius considered cosmopolitanism to be the extension of one’s “concentric circles of care,” starting from one’s immediate family and growing in ever-widening loops to include one’s tribe, community, region, nation, and, finally, all of mankind.

It is possible that Americans, because of their consciousness of interests that extend beyond those of immediate family and clan, are more aware than others of their responsibility as members of a community of nations.

Our findings, of course, need confirmation. And interrogation. Regardless of how it is interpreted, the biggest take-away from this research is that this worldwide data-capture of attitudes and opinions offers a way to vault the prison wall of misunderstanding among far-flung nations, disparate faiths, and warring factions. We look forward to the thoughtful analysis of our readers. ■