

# Social Cohesion Radar

## Measuring Common Ground

An international Comparison of Social Cohesion

Country Report: USA



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## 1 The Study

The *Social Cohesion Radar* offers an empirical, international comparison of social cohesion, defined as the overall quality of communal life, over the past 25 years across 34 countries (EU 27 plus seven western OECD countries – Australia, Canada, Israel, New Zealand, Norway, Switzerland and USA).

Social cohesion is defined as the special quality how members of a community live and work together. A cohesive society is characterized by resilient social relationships, a positive emotional connectedness between its members and the community and a pronounced focus on the common good. Modern societies are based not on solidarity rooted in similarity, but on solidarity rooted in diversity and mutual interdependence. Therefore they need an inclusive form of social cohesion that not only accepts a multitude of lifestyles and identities, but views them as a strength.

Commissioned by the Bertelsmann Foundation and carried out by a research team of the Jacobs University Bremen, led by professors Klaus Boehnke and Jan Delhey, it breaks down the concept of social cohesion into three dimensions – social relationships, connectedness, and focus on the common good – each consisting of three individual, measurable components.

It is based on a broad set of indicators drawn from comparative international surveys and other scientific data.

## 2 Social Cohesion Remains Very High Despite Slight Decline

The United States of America (US) have continuously shown very high levels of social cohesion over the past 25 years and in an international comparison are comfortably placed at the top of the second-ranked country group, trailing only Scandinavia by a small margin, finds the study *Social Cohesion Radar: Measuring Common Ground*. This result is especially notable considering the US' much larger size, both in area and population, as well as its much higher ethnic diversity compared to the study's other frontrunners.

According to the report, the only dimensions of enquiry that prevented the US from moving into the top group were those of social networks, measuring the quality and quantity of social relations and social networks, and of trust towards political and societal institutions, both of which registered declines in recent years. However, even these two weaker scores are not below-average, making the US one of only six out of the 34 EU and OECD countries assessed to be average-or-above across the board in all nine categories.

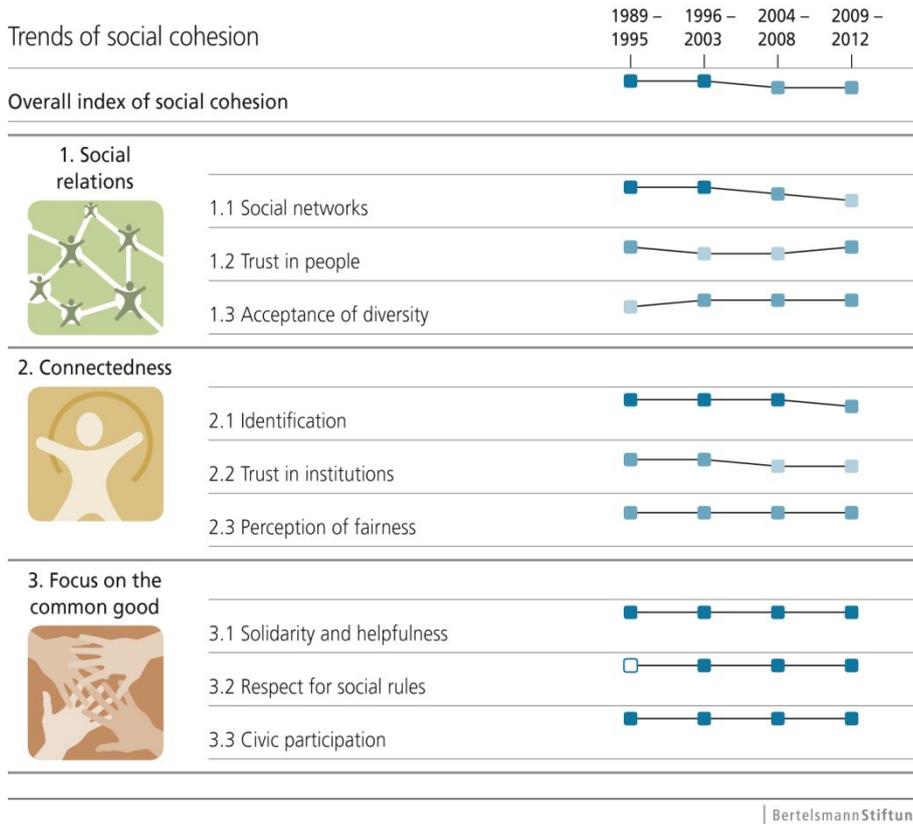
### *US overall leader in focus on the common good*

The study identified an extremely strong focus on the common good – measured by the three factors of solidarity, respect for social rules, and civic participation – to be the US' biggest strength. In all three of the above factors the US registered nothing but the highest possible marks throughout all four time periods assessed between 1989 and 2012, making it the lone champion of this category.

Other areas contributing to social cohesion where the US was found to be above-average were the acceptance of diversity, the perception of fairness, and the population's identification with the nation, although the latter took a little dip in the most recent data period (2009 – 2012).

The US' overall country profile thus aligns with that of the other Anglo-Saxon countries of Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Ireland. All of these showed fairly high scores in all areas of enquiry and are only outranked by the Scandinavians. The fact that these two distinct country groups dominate the rating throughout is particularly interesting in consideration of their fundamentally different societal and political orders. Evidently, the US' more liberal welfare state, bigger income gap, and higher ethnic diversity does not *per se* prevent the development of social cohesion.

# United States



## COMMENTS

The figure shows trends in social cohesion and its nine dimensions over time. The top row shows the overall index of social cohesion. The rest of the figure shows the partial dimensions, grouped into three domains. The color of the dots indicates the country's position in relation to the other 33 countries: dark blue stands for the top tier, blue for the second tier, light blue for the middle tier, yellow for the fourth tier and orange for the bottom tier.

White dots indicate that estimated values were used because insufficient data were available for that time period. The relative position of the dots shows which group the country belongs to.

### 3 Overall Results - Scandinavia top, South East Europe bottom

For the most recent data period, the study shows the countries of Scandinavia to be the overall leaders in social cohesion, followed by the Anglo-Saxon non-European countries and the small and relatively wealthy continental European countries plus the bigger Germany.

Only then follows a group with the UK, France, Spain, and Belgium. The below-average category includes most East European and some Mediterranean countries, while the bottom of the table consists of the Baltic states (with the exception of Estonia) and the South East European countries.

*Three conditions that promote strong social cohesion: economic wealth, equitable income distribution and technological progress towards a knowledge society*

Looking into the possible causes for and factors impacting on social cohesion, the study found a strong positive correlation between the wealth of a country, measured by GDP, and its social cohesion. In a similar vein, there exists a strong reverse relationship between a country's income distribution and its social cohesion. A higher level of income inequality, measured by Gini coefficient, is associated with weaker social cohesion. Finally modernization does not diminish social cohesion. Instead the most innovative societies – with regard on educational level, economic innovations and technological infrastructure – show a higher level of social cohesion.

*High levels of immigration and globalization have no effects on social cohesion*

The study shows that neither immigration nor globalization undermine social cohesion on a national level. There is no statistical significant relation between the percentage of immigrants and the level of social cohesion. The current levels of immigration and diversity are not fundamentally detrimental to social cohesion. Globalization as well, measured in its economic, social and political dimensions, has no negative effects on social cohesion.

*People in cohesive societies are more satisfied with their life*

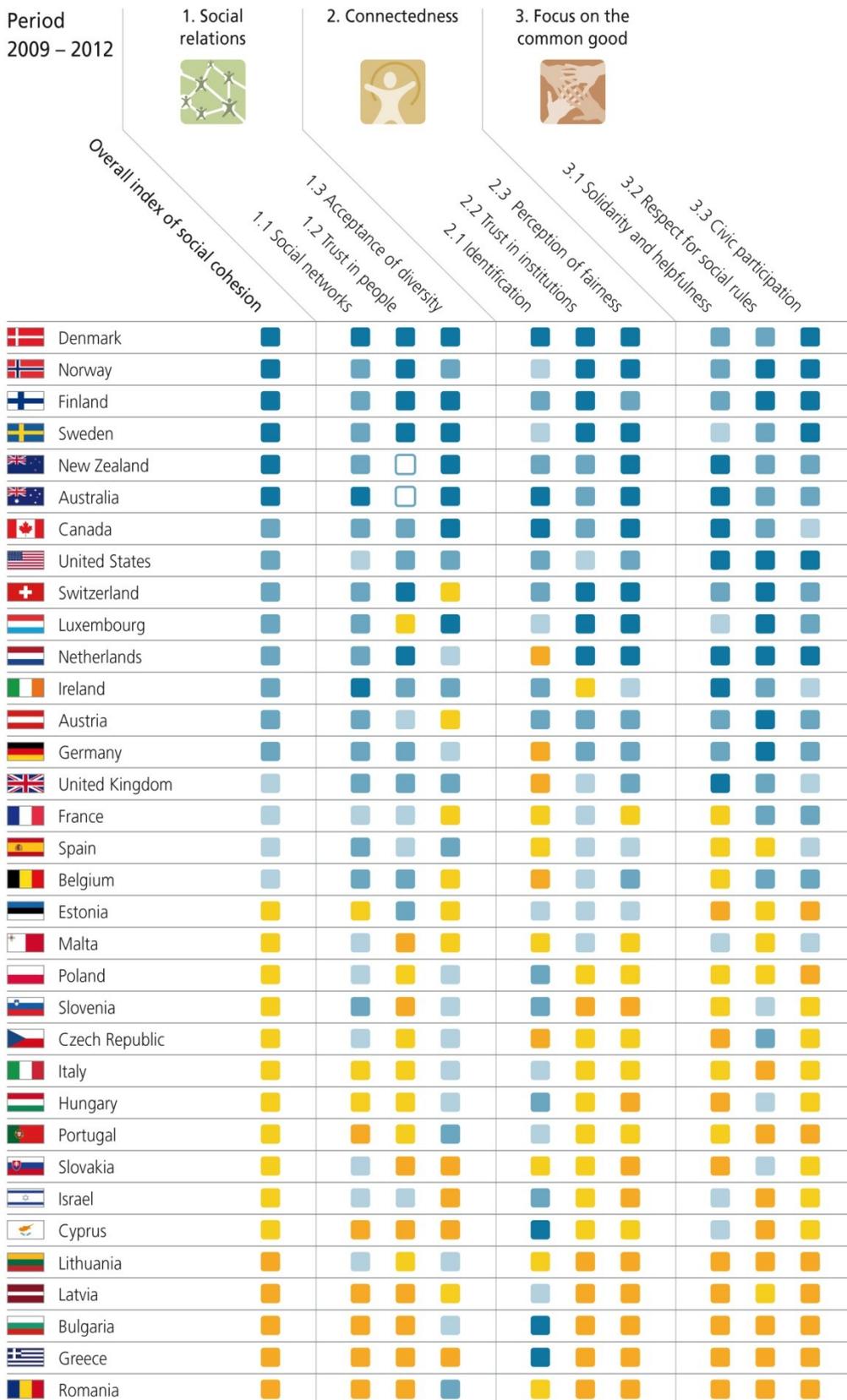
With view of the effects social cohesion may have on a population, the study confirms that citizens in societies with high levels of social cohesion enjoy much higher levels of perceived well-being, justifying the attention the concept has received in recent years.

## **4 Conclusion**

The US' strong results in the areas of common societal good and its high acceptance of diversity fall in line with its traditional reputation as a 'melting pot', uniting migrants from the most different walks of life under a common banner and providing a sense of community and ownership among a most heterogeneous population.

What also makes the case of the US a special one is that it is by far the most religious among all countries with an above-average level of social cohesion. All countries that display higher levels of importance of religion in daily life are at least two overall categories further down the social cohesion index.

An international comparison of social cohesion (2009 – 2012)



The figure shows mean values for the nine dimensions for the EU and Western OECD countries. The five colors designate the top tier (dark blue = ■), second tier (blue = ■), middle tier (light blue = ■), fourth tier (yellow = ■) and bottom tier (orange = ■). White dots (□) designate dimension values that were estimated based on other time periods.

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