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### Oxford Handbook Of American Political Development

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## CHAPTER 1

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# INTRODUCTION

### *The Distinctiveness and Necessity of American Political Development*

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SUZANNE METTLER AND RICHARD M. VALELLY

THIS volume showcases an analytic approach to researching and understanding US politics that first came on the scene some thirty years ago; it carries the same name as its subject of study—"American political development" or APD. APD still retains a critical edge that can be traced to its origins as a dissenting form of political science. An insurgent group of scholars associated with the general renewal of historical institutionalism (March and Olsen 1984) urged colleagues across the social sciences to "bring the state back in," publishing an edited volume under that banner (Evans, Rueschemeyer, and Skocpol 1985). Stephen Skowronek's roughly contemporaneous book, *Building a New American State: The Expansion of National Administrative Capacities, 1877-1920*, epitomized the value of applying such an approach to American politics (Skowronek 1982). Skowronek's study—now regarded as a classic—traced the fraught, arduous struggle to construct government agencies that could better accomplish crucial tasks of governance. It thus put the development of state capacity front and center as a major dynamic that ramified throughout all of American politics.

In 1986 Karen Orren and Skowronek launched a journal entitled *Studies in American Political Development*, thereby coining and entrenching the term "American political development." Also, Amy Bridges played a critical role in founding, along with David Brady, the Politics and History Organized Section of the American Political Science Association. The APD approach truly took flight.<sup>1</sup>

The study of APD has attracted not only scholars who directly focus on its various facets and concerns but also many other scholars who have other primary interests—such as the presidency and Congress—and who find the APD sensibility quite useful for enriching their studies. As Jeffery Jenkins shows in this volume, a remarkably similar interest in understanding institutions and their history simultaneously emerged among rational choice scholars as they took stock of the instability theorems. These theorems

(the Arrow Theorem, the Condorcet Paradox, and the McKelvey Chaos Theorem, to name the best known) raised the obvious question of why there was so much real world stability (Tullock 1981). The door to institutional analysis—and to treatment of institutional creation, evolution, and stability—consequently swung open in that part of political science as well.

Moreover, a consciously historical and evolutionary sensibility has migrated into the behavioral core of the field. Increasingly political behavior scholars have considered how to recover public opinion and its determinants and representational consequences before the rise of the modern survey. (See, for example, Dykstra and Hahn 1968; Lee 2002; Karol 2007.) Thanks to the award-winning efforts of Adam Berinsky and Eric Schickler—with input from several talented colleagues—the earliest “modern” surveys of the 1930s and 1940s have been reconstructed and reweighted, permitting a wide range of new investigations into the rise of mass liberalism and conservatism in the twentieth century (Berinsky 2006; Berinsky, Powell, Schickler, and Yohai 2011).

APD scholars have also considered whether and how policy feedback alters the mass bases of politics—and thus the options available to party politicians and elected officials (Pierson 1993; Campbell 2012). In doing this, they have shown that the state sometimes shapes society as much as society shapes the state. A paradigmatic case is the GI Bill. It fed back into American politics and decisively generated the civic engagement of a key population among the citizenry—returning World War II veterans (Mettler 2005; see also Mettler and Milstein 2007).

Given how extensively the APD approach has recast the study of American politics, we believed that the time had clearly come for a *Handbook on American Political Development*. As its editors we have spent the past several years considering what has evolved over the decades following APD’s birth. We have solicited the collection of essays here to indicate the value, scope, and promise of pursuing it. The volume is not, we hasten to add, exhaustive. Nonetheless, the contents of the volume speak for themselves, indicating the breadth and depth of the approach and the many avenues it offers for furthering our understanding of American politics. Our contribution, with this introduction, is not to preview and summarize each essay but instead to offer broad observations about the distinctiveness of APD and its value to the larger discipline.

## A WIDE-ANGLE LENS

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Perhaps the most distinguishing feature of APD analysis is the ambitious scope and historical depth of the analysis that its followers often undertake. Much of the study of American politics takes what Paul Pierson has dubbed a “pizza pie approach.” Pierson pictures “[h]ighly institutionalized and very large communities of researchers” who “focus on particular slices of the political system (Congress, the presidency, interest groups, parties, etc.)” Each of these, in turn, focuses on specific “sites and modes of

political activity,” meaning particular institutions, or forms of organization, or types of political action (Pierson 2007, 147.) This creates high-resolution precision and clarity—and yields deep understandings of a wide range of vital phenomena, such as the politics of congressional committee jurisdictions, the rise of czars in the White House, whether referenda produce civic engagement, and the variability of Supreme Court medians, just to name a few. Meanwhile, the methodological individualism that suffuses American political science has also pushed ever further into cognitive and affective psychology, neurobiology, and genetics. Combined with the explosion of experimentalism, these inquiries have opened up new and exciting vistas on American democracy’s individual-level foundations.

APD plays, however, an equally vital role by exploiting the possibilities of “macro” and longitudinal treatment of American politics. Scholars of APD typically use a wider-angle lens in their analysis, looking at the historically evolved relationship between some institution and some type of organization or activity, or more broadly, at the politics that has emerged between a pair of institutions, or even at the level of the political system as a whole, across the federal or state levels or between them. (See, for instance, Crowe 2012; Lavelle 2013; Schickler 2001.) APD embraces holism. To put the point another way, APD helps analysts of American politics to see the pizza for the slices!

The wide-angle lens indeed permits APD scholars to broach the proverbial “big questions.” They include the origins and temporal variability of power in the American political system and how it operates, the striking persistence of constitutional forms despite the Civil War and the New Deal, when and how political change occurs, the legitimacy of the administrative state, who gets represented by a given set of political circumstances, how such developments affect society or the economy, whether the American regime nurtures virtue, character, and generous civic engagement, whether the public interest can be identified and prevail, the extent to which civil–military relations are healthy, whether public problems can be addressed and solved, whether government is bloated, the many meanings of citizenship—and, not least, the survival of the American regime itself. These questions constituted the major concerns of such erstwhile luminaries as (among others) Martha Derthick, Samuel P. Huntington, Theodore Lowi, and James Q. Wilson.

APD scholarship aspires to carry on that ambitious legacy. As the discipline of political science has matured the monographic studies that self-consciously engage these kinds of big questions can certainly be found—for example, in the work of Larry Bartels and Nolan McCarty, who happen to be two of our volume contributors. But our pair of examples make our point: senior scholars typically ask the big questions, but junior scholars refrain from doing so. The premium on methodological virtuosity has never been greater. Add to that the new and overriding interest in resolving problems of causal inference. Many scholars today easily conclude that they ought to first work long and hard in the positivist trenches—helping to build a “normal science” of experimental results that are reported in very rigorous and brief articles—before they dare to look up toward the horizon of regime-level issues.<sup>2</sup> The obvious concern is that if they put off learning how to think at the regime level they may never get to do it at all.

By contrast, the study of American political development more readily breaks open regime-level questions. It does this because of its holism, its emphasis on vital arcs of change, and its attendant effort to figure out what they mean. There is a trade-off: the reliability of the proposed causal inferences is not taken as utterly primary (though they are taken quite seriously through various kinds of checks, such as counterfactual analysis.) But by the same token we try to honestly figure out what the wide-angle view is telling us.

One very useful consequence—as Kimberly Morgan’s chapter suggests—is the facilitation of cross-national comparative analysis. (For an example of what we mean, one that draws in part on APD work, see Stepan and Linz 2011.) We hardly claim that *all* APD work operates nimbly at the level of “the regime.” Much APD work certainly focuses on elaborating and extending the generalizations and formulations of leading APD scholars rather than breaking new ground. But we do think that there is more of an “elective affinity”—to borrow from Goethe (2000 [1809])—between APD work and regime-level reflection and generalization. As we have emphasized, several of the contributions to this volume reflect that elective affinity.

## INSTITUTIONS MATTER

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As the previous discussion has suggested, the phrase “institutions matter” also captures much of what APD is known for. Broadly speaking, by “institutions” we mean the rules and procedures that structure behavior and provide incentives, norms, and resources that shape it. Most APD scholars would include formal governmental institutions: executive bureaucracies, insulated policymakers in central banks and courts, legislatures, and local and special purpose governments. They also mean the internal structure of legislatures, their leadership positions, and their norms. Public law, and public policy—including foreign policy, colonial administration, and national security policy—also count. Informal institutions and organizations, such as political parties, groups, and movements, clearly fall within the institutional purview. So do politically created market institutions—property rights, government-created technologies that undergird commerce, or commercial and admiralty law—that facilitate and regulate commerce and trade.

What does not count? This is a tough question. Elinor Ostrom’s Nobel Prize-winning work on conventions unsupported by property rights is self-consciously institutionalist (Ostrom 1990). APD scholars have a similarly catholic view of institutions. We do not even draw the line where anthropology begins, say, with handshakes. After all, the Supreme Court was different after Chief Justice Melville Fuller instituted the conference handshake. Political life requires many sorts of institutions.

Of course, as our reference to Ostrom is meant to underscore and as we noted at the outset, many scholars not affiliated with APD focus on institutions as well. Among the many social science communities which know that “institutions matter” are rational

choice institutionalists, including scholars who study veto pivots and their consequences for policy, public law, and executive and legislative agenda setting and bargaining. APD is indeed just one part of the “new institutionalism” that emerged in the 1980s and has moved in several different directions since then.

What APD has added, however, is a stronger preoccupation with the emergence and relative durability of American national institutions, policy domains, and governance arrangements. Here’s an example of a question in the APD vein: does Congress continue to be a highly salient institution, and why or why not? In his work on Congress, for example, David Mayhew has asked why Congress has remained viable—and has connected the answer to how Congress is a valued source of consequential careers for talented and ambitious professional politicians. In taking advantage of that opportunity structure members of Congress have strutted on the political stage, sought to shape public opinion—and simultaneously renewed and adapted Congress to the Sysyphean task of remaining a central player in the Madisonian system (Mayhew 2000). Sarah Binder, by contrast, has shown that rising partisan polarization, in combination with institutional arrangements and divided government, has reduced productivity in lawmaking (Binder 2003, 2015).

Or how and why has the Fed’s independence grown despite its role in deepening the 1981–82 recession and in precipitating the 2007–9 recession? Despite periods of sharp congressional criticism, the Fed’s monetary and financial-regulatory authority remains more—not less—powerful in shaping both macroeconomic performance and distribution. Why? Scholars are currently at work on these questions as well (Binder and Spindel 2013; Jacobs and King 2016).

Historically oriented scholars treat these sorts of questions and puzzles. They exercise a keen awareness that adaptive or reconstitutive institutional change is a central dynamic in American politics—one that appeared very early. Milkis has shown that the Founders separated into party factions in part to save the Constitution from Hamilton’s efforts to build a strong central state apparatus. Swift revealed that early in the nineteenth century the Senate was changed from being something like a House of Lords into a popularly responsive and accountable legislature (Milkis 1999; Swift 1996). APD scholarship captures, in other words, the contingent evolution of institutions, tracing the struggles of actors inside institutions and organizations to perpetuate them, to reconstitute how they work, or to adapt them to new challenges.

One also sees this preoccupation with institutionally reconstitutive moments in the growing APD literature on the Civil War and Reconstruction (Bensel 1990; Brandwein 1999; Valelly 2014, 2004)—and in careful studies of major social policy shifts (Skocpol 1992) and in moments of regime stress (Katznelson 2014). The APD literature on interest groups and protest movements—and a very rich APD parties literature—also underscore how APD is particularly attentive to alteration and adaptation over time, usefully denaturalizing what otherwise would seem familiar or normal to us today. The interest group system and its “pressure tactics” and the Washington-based standing congressional lobby are inventions, forged in specific historical contexts. Formative political contexts have included, for example, the exclusion of women from the franchise and

the one-party dominance of Republicans in agricultural states (Clemens 1997; Hansen 1991). Likewise, post-WWII civil rights protest in the South was critically led and shaped by the skills and confidence of returning black veterans, thus opening a fresh angle on a familiar story (Parker 2009).

## IDEAS MATTER

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As we have just stressed, APD theorizes and lucidly traces previously unexplored but consequential, formal and informal macroinstitutional pivots, developmental paths, and outcomes. More than other parts of the study of American politics, APD scholarship also holds that political ideas matter—that is, that they are independent forces in politics and in the life of the American regime, as the chapters in this volume by Ericson and Morone so richly demonstrate.

Prominent among treatments of constitutive ideas are those focusing on civic ideals and jurisprudential and constitutional innovation. The basic text here, of course, is Louis Hartz's 1955 masterpiece (Hartz 1955). The most sophisticated and persuasive treatment to date of the constitutive role of political ideas—a magnum opus which eclipses Hartz's achievement—is Rogers Smith's now classic identification of competing "civic ideals," that is, very richly developed, conflicting ideational traditions about who deserves American citizenship (Smith 1997). Quite recently, in a painstaking reconstruction of a now lost world of nineteenth-century rights discourse, Pamela Brandwein has shown that the Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction decades were periods of exceptionally creative thinking about the meaning of rights on the Supreme Court (Brandwein 2011). Zackin has shown that those who have made and developed state constitutions have done something similar—created a little known but potent tradition of "positive rights" (Zackin 2013).

The constitutive role of ideas has also been traced for public philosophies and, in particular, for how intellectuals, activists, and of course national party politicians have tried to reconstitute institutions and to entrench or embed these philosophies in those institutions. Thus Howard Gillman has shown how late nineteenth-century Republicans sought to embed their public philosophy through strategies of judicial recruitment and institutional design of the judiciary—and in a companion study has shown how liberal Democratic presidents sought to do the same in order to entrench modern judicial liberalism in the courts (Gillman 2002, 2006). Looking at a very different "ism," Steven Teles has provided a particularly nuanced and rich treatment of the "long march" of modern legal conservatives to change the judiciary and other national institutions (Teles 2008).

Political economic ideas have also played a formative role in creating the American polity. This is shown by scholars in what might be called the "MIT School" of American political development, which flourished in the 1990s. Its inspiration came from how Suzanne Berger and Charles Sabel thought about the historical politics of markets and industrialization, technology, and manufacturing. Its exemplars demonstrated that

*political economic* visions—such as powerful and elaborate theories of how to shape industrial conflict (Hattam 1993), monetary policy (Ritter 1997), railroadization (Berk 1994; Dunlavy 1994), trade (Shoch 2001), and scientific innovation (Hart 1998)—in turn ramified into party politics, economic growth, union formation, trade policy, technology formation, and governmental planning capacities. Political economic analysis can be seen, as well, in the magisterial studies of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century political parties produced by Sanders (treating the Democrats) and Bensei (treating the Republicans)—works which show that, unlike non-ideological, vote-getting, catch-all parties, the major parties instead had highly sophisticated economic regulatory programs after the Civil War and into the early twentieth century (Sanders 1999; Bensei 2000).

## IDENTITY FORMATION AND CIVIC STATUS

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APD scholarship also increasingly attends to the political construction of identities and civic status. On this view, race, gender, ethnicity, class, the family, and sexual orientation are not pre-political identities, whose origins and evolution are best traced by social psychology and sociology. Instead, they are, in significant part, *political* constructs. The sense of linked fate that informs an individual's conscious identification with a "race" or a group or a gender originates in, for example, party strategies, in how public policy creates or sharply reinforces ascriptive differences and hierarchies, and in the power of ideas. Particularly useful in this regard is the foundational work of Desmond King. His corpus of work underscores both the role of the state and of "racial orders" (that in turn are undergirded by democratizing or hierarchy-preserving coalitions) in entrenching or dissolving illiberal racial binaries (e.g., King 2007; King and Smith 2011).

## YES, THERE IS A STATE

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Another basic contribution of APD scholarship is its insistence that, like other polities, America has a *state*. By that we mean a coherently (though not necessarily tightly) connected ensemble of legitimate, stable, and resilient (but also evolving) national and sub-national institutions of representation and legislation, governance, and jurisprudence building. Skillful professionals circulate into and out of these institutions according to various calendars and schedules. Their linkages to political parties, elections, groups, and public opinion shape their actions, views, decisions, and behavior. But such actions, critically, are imperfectly monitored, even if there are robust, independent private communications media (DeCanio 2016). While responsive to social demands and public opinion the men and women in the state are therefore also "autonomous," that is, their views and behavior are rooted in intellectual worldviews, public philosophy, "reason of



state,” professional ethics, entrepreneurial visions of new roles for government, access to and dialogue with experts, and of course patriotism and public spirit. Systems of revenue extraction support this ensemble of institutions and people (Einhorn 2006; Levi 1988; Pollack 2009). So does access to copious amounts of reliable and longitudinal data about the economy and society and expert evaluations of these data (Kelman 1987). Not least, a monopoly over the legitimate means of force, exercised within territorial boundaries and constructed, expanded, and defended over the course of a national history, protects and legitimates the nation and its representatives and rulers.

At one time APD’s recognition that America has a state, particularly APD’s emphasis on the relative autonomy of the American state, was controversial. Around 1990 one of us faced ridicule at a job talk for asserting that there is a state in America, and was told quite emphatically—to the room’s evident approval—that to talk about the American state was to talk nonsense. Since the author was then untenured, anxious, and unwilling to set off fireworks, awkward silence ensued during this Alice-in-Wonderland moment. But a voice in the author’s head asked, “What about the Joint Economic Committee? The Fed? The CIA? The Pentagon? The Executive Office of the President? The FBI? SEC? FAA? FDA? CBO? OMB? BEA? BIA? EPA? CEA? DEA? LEAA? NIST? NLRB? FMS? DARPA? IRS?” For a long, distracting moment the acronyms would not stop!

To be fair, the kernel of truth in the pompous censure was a sound point, namely, that talking about the American state can lead to abstract theorizing of the hand-waving variety. There is some danger of this, of course—but we are struck by how the institutional orientation of APD scholars instead inclines them to concretely identify and document the variety and functioning of actual arrangements that undergird American governance.

APD scholarship on the state is also particularly focused—borrowing from the discipline’s methodological individualism and emphasis on agency—on the role of *state-builders*. This has everything to do with the ambiguous constitutional status of the state. As Alexander Hamilton’s obsession with and career in early state building suggest, the US Constitution indicated little about how the new nation should develop governing capacity. Federal bureaucracies have varied in their governing authority or accountability to other political actors or the public. Exploiting the ambiguity in the Constitution, innovative bureaucratic leaders have enhanced their agencies’ legitimacy and effectiveness through forging ties with organizations and others in civil society (Carpenter 2001, 2010; Moore 2011; Roberts 2013).

Moreover, as we already noted, “the state” is not just in Washington, DC. Throughout American history, the federal government has encouraged, coerced, or cajoled the individual states to develop their capacity to serve many governing functions—and vice versa (Derthick 2001). States have also done much on their own, often serving as sites for the development of positive rights (Zackin 2013) and policy experimentation (as Andrew Karch notes in this volume). In addition, American government has channeled considerable governing authority through private or non-profit channels, subsidizing or inviting organizations and business to provide services or to distribute resources that it finances (Smith and Lipsky 1993; Dobbin and Sutton 1998). Strikingly Congress built

a robust private enforcement regime of civil rights litigation led by lawyers outside the federal government (Farhang 2010).

Relatedly, APD scholars' interest in the American state has led them to appreciate how the resources inherent in public policies become valued by politicians and citizens even as government's role in bestowing them may simultaneously seem "out of sight," "hidden," or "submerged" (Howard 1997; Mettler 2011). That paradoxical evolution, APD has shown, has emerged historically and developmentally, and it is the cumulative result of policy design, the making of the tax code, bureaucratic evolution, and the creation of a myriad of government-sponsored enterprises (e.g., Fannie Mae, Farmer Mac, or Sallie Mae) and other private-public partnerships (such as the Federal Accounting Standards Board).

Indeed, structuring the role of the state and of government policy in the lives of Americans has been a central project of elected officials throughout the course of American political development (Balogh 2009; Sparrow 2011). The titanic struggle over Obamacare has revolved in large part around whether and how to "bring the state in." But the struggle has been more than a clash over the size of government and program affordability; ultimately the Affordable Care Act may change how Americans think about the state in their lives—and about public policy more generally.

APD scholars do not see society alone as the prime mover in politics, and neither do they understand that role to fall to the state; instead state and society interact in that process, they are joined in a dance over time. Elected officials know that there is a certain social wariness about government—and they can choose to reinforce it, to accommodate it even as they expand the role of government, or to consciously challenge it, knowing that the time is ripe for the challenge to succeed. (For general and formal discussion see Levi 1988.) For instance, the federal government, needing quick access to revenue, instituted tax withholding during WWII. The emergency made that possible. Most ironically, a young Milton Friedman dreamed up the idea (Zelenak 2013, 12, ch. 5). That was a state-centered change which reconfigured the terrain of politics—and after the war created a new normal.

Besides state-society interactions of these sorts, APD scholarship also takes *state capacity* seriously—the variable (which is sometimes dependent, sometimes independent) that Skowronek brought to everyone's attention in 1982. By state capacity we mean "government being able to do what its various legitimate principals want it to do when they want it to." As an independent variable it augments what officials, groups, and citizens *can* do in politics. But it can also constrain such actors. In a terrible crisis state capacity can "sputter"—as Graham Allison showed in hair-raising detail in his pioneering treatment of the Cuban Missile Crisis (Allison 1971).

Much of the literature on state capacity often (and correctly) assumes that state capacity, in a democratic context, is a democratic good. Strong or supple state capacity can expand the menu of collectively useful initiatives for officials and citizens to think about and discuss. Democracy features open public debate about how government ought to acquire and deploy public resources—such as revenue, infrastructure, access to high-grade expertise, accurate and appropriate information about society and the economy,

or means of coercion. Such debate would matter little if government could not actually accomplish broad goals that are defined through open debate and other distinctively democratic institutions and processes.

The focus on state capacity accordingly allows searching investigation of such large matters as competent (or flawed) macroeconomic guidance (Grossman 2013). Instances of both capacity and incapacity in this domain can be seen in the recent performance of the Federal Reserve. Its weakness in financial regulation helped to precipitate the epic financial crisis of Fall 2008—but the creativity that it and the Treasury showed in stabilizing finance and credit helped to rescue the American economy from a catastrophic contraction.

State capacity can also be market making. Consider in this connection the Food and Drug Administration. It has been forced to constantly balance demands to cut regulatory corners and at the same time assure the efficacy and safety of pharmaceuticals. Yet in sustaining its regulatory capacities the FDA has been a major market maker (Carpenter 2010). The pharmaceutical industry in the United States would not exist in the form it does without the American state. Americans ingest a steady diet of useful (and for millions life-enhancing) pharmaceuticals because the American state is competent.

APD's appreciation of the state hardly means, though, that APD scholars are cheerleaders for Leviathan. Nietzsche wrote that "the state is the coldest of all cold monsters . . ." (quoted in Rose and Miller 1992, 173). While hardly going that far in our view of the state, we candidly acknowledge that state capacity has a very troubling side as well (Scott 1998).

That aspect of state capacity can be seen all through American history—starting with "Indian removal" and the establishment of an administrative state to govern Native Americans (Rockwell 2010). Another example is the enforcement of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act (Lubet 2010). Consider, too, the rise of colonial and imperial administration early in the twentieth century (Moore 2011), the internment of Japanese Americans during WWII (Hayashi 2008), the little-known role of eugenics and state-sponsored sterilization (Hansen and King 2013), and the rise of the carceral state over the past generation (see Lerman and Weaver in this volume). Although these illiberal and punitive facets of the state capacity variable have not received as much attention as the democracy-enhancing sides, various contemporary phenomena—the national security state (Goldsmith 2012), the congressional maintenance of a military-industrial complex (Thorpe 2013), and the carceral state (Gottschalk 2014)—are helping, properly, to put "dark state capacity" on the APD agenda.

## HISTORY MATTERS

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APD also holds that "history matters." *All* analysts of American politics grasp the relevance of history, to be sure. What APD counsels, however, is *putting history first*, as opposed to shoehorning seemingly stylized facts about American political history here

and there into one's work. Do history systematically and explicitly, we say, and question existing assumptions about what the facts actually are.

We also debate the many kinds of historical dynamics that shape American politics. We investigate the existence of secular trends, such as modernization, bureaucratization, or democratization. In some instances, the more striking phenomenon in American politics is the persistence of very deep continuities. As Mayhew has often remarked concerning the continuity of the Constitution of 1787—and as Louis Hartz first argued, albeit more by way of bemoaning the limits of American political culture—perhaps a deep kind of *non*-development characterizes American politics (Hartz 1955; Mayhew 2000; Huntington 1968, ch. 2). Concerning presidential elections, Larry Bartels has carefully documented the regularity and strength of electoral competitiveness (Bartels 1998). As King and Smith have argued, racial orders are a permanent feature of American politics (King and Smith 2011).

But besides these steady-state constants and continuities we also wonder about a different kind of constant—namely, various forms of recurrence. While the theory of electoral realignment is dead (Mayhew 2002), the concept of recurring “regimes” in presidential politics has gained considerable traction due to the analytic elegance and power of Skowronek's handling of the idea in his portrayal of the presidency in American politics (Skowronek 1997). APD scholars have indeed long argued for the causal role and comparability of cycles and powerful public moods focused on uplifting political renewal (Huntington 1981; Mayhew 2005; Morone 1990, 2003). Religious awakenings have shaped American politics more than once. The counterpoint between renewal and entropy can extend to the political economy and to society. Thus increases in income inequality and the emergence of debate over whether the super-rich are a problem for American democracy has happened more than once (Hacker and Pierson 2010; Mettler 2015). America has experienced not one but two comparable “reconstructions” of African American voting rights and Southern party and electoral politics (Valelly 2004).

Mark Twain supposedly said something to the effect that while history may not repeat itself it certainly rhymes. He actually never said it (no one knows who did), but the idea captures a truth about a polity that displays the kind of stability and continuities that the American system has shown. We are a nation still strongly tethered, for better or worse (Levinson 2006), to the Constitution of 1787. It would be surprising if, over the course of nearly two and a half centuries, political history did *not* repeat itself (Haydu 1998).

Awareness that “history matters” also sensitizes APD scholars to the role of events and contingency—a valuable corrective for the tendency that all of us have to think that historical processes probably had to take the forms that they did (Shapiro and Bedi 2007). Accordingly, APD scholarship is also alive to the role of turning points and “critical junctures”—and their larger consequences (Soifer 2012; but see Collins 2007). In the evolution of policy domains, change can happen incrementally, yes—but policy change also happens through the episodic (sometimes fortuitous) opening of policy windows that permit non-incremental change (Kingdon 2003).

One turning point that regularly has been revisited and debated is the political incorporation of organized labor (Hattam 1993; Orren 1991). In most advanced democracies the process of industrialization generated social stresses that, in turn, fostered labor radicalism of various kinds. But Debsian socialism, despite its surge before WWI, never transitioned into a significant political force outside certain Northern cities and states and parts of the Upper Midwest. What explains the exceptionalist outcome in the United States? (Archer 2007; Lipset and Marks 2000). The question matters for comparativists—but it also matters a great deal for understanding the subsequent role of organized labor in American politics (Greenstone 1977; Roof 2011; Vossing 2012).

Or consider polarization: the process by which party politicians have separated and sorted themselves into rival, behaviorally cohesive, and fairly disciplined ideological camps (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006: 3). Polarization began in the 1970s and has deepened since then (apparently asymmetrically, with the Republican Party moving further to the right than Democrats have moved to the left). In turn, that sorting process has (among other effects) complicated and changed the leadership tasks of congressional leaders and how they coordinate campaign finance, committee assignments, and communication with the public. It probably reduces the rate of policy enactment (see McCarty, this volume). In other words, looking back we can see that the mid-1970s constituted a major turning point in APD (Borstelmann 2011).

As our discussion of polarization would suggest, an idea connected to the turning point concept is path dependence (Pierson 2000). The basic idea here is that a turning point becomes a process that feeds on itself and deepens—and that that happens in considerable part because more and more people adjust their behavior to take account of the process. They act on the expectation that the process not only is here to stay but that its emergence also requires them to adjust, or that it is materially valuable to adjust to it. They thereby—and rather paradoxically—“lock in” the process.

A particularly salient instance in social policy, as Paul Pierson first pointed out, is the contributory finance, old-age income security program that we call Social Security. As participation in the program widened and as millions began to count on it, a second order consequence was the emergence of network externalities—that is, the creation of linkages between the program and, for instance, private pension planning or the rise of retirement communities. The policy began to “feed back” into the society and economy in ways that then permanently altered the context for debate and reform of the program (Pierson 1994).

The linkages are not formal, of course. And, to be sure, continuous administrative initiative expanded Social Security (Derthick 1979). But nonetheless the expectations held by millions of similarly situated market actors—and the actions that they undertake as a result—have embedded Social Security in society and the economy. Moving “off path”—even through a redesign of the benefit delivery mechanism such as the accounts privatization promoted by President George W. Bush in 2005—is insuperably difficult. It is in that sense that path dependence entails “lock-in.”

But lock-in does not always happen—indeed the why and how of retrenchment, backlash, and failure are enduring puzzles (Chinn 2014; Patashnik 2008). Hacker has

shown that retrenchment can occur through inaction and neglect as well as through deliberate policy change. Staszak has adapted his analytic template of unobtrusive but deep retrenchment to showing how access to the courts has gradually but thoroughly been reduced by a wide range of actors in the wake of the rights revolution of the mid-twentieth century (Hacker 2004; Staszak 2015). Yet backlash can also be quite open, indeed unmistakable and deeply unsettling. The most spectacular case is the two-decade long struggle to disenfranchise black Southerners, starting in Florida (1889) and ending in Georgia (1907). That backlash in turn restructured congressional politics and national policy possibilities in ways that were evident for decades, from the Wilson Administration well into the 1970s.

Another facet of APD's attention to historical dynamics is recognition that multiple types of change can happen simultaneously—hence the fertile idea of *multiple orders in action* (Orren and Skowronek 2004: 108–118). Consider the separation of powers, the emergence of bureaucracies, the rise of policy domains, the persistence of federalism, the proliferation of local and special governments (Mullin 2009), different patterns of party-building (Galvin 2009), the relative autonomy of public law and the courts, and the many institutional openings for entrepreneurship (Sheingate 2003). American politics offers a vast beehive of incongruous patterns of political action. They operate according to different logics and “clocks,” as it were. On the other hand, the existence of multiple orders in action also opens up possibilities for creative political action. Entrepreneurs can discern and exploit the political possibilities of different orders operating in parallel. They can innovate new institutional forms that temporarily resolve comparable problems that actors in evolving institutional settings share (Schickler 2001).

To sum up, we seek to expand the *range* of our intuition that “history matters” into a working assumption that history must matter in a remarkably wide—but also quite specific—variety of ways. We have different names for them: regimes, orders, multiple orders in action, layering, path dependence, cycles, disjointed pluralism, policy feedback. What each of these terms refers to can be found in more detail in the contributions to the volume (see also Sheingate 2014).

All of this, we recognize, may sound like a special case of having a hammer and finding nails everywhere you look. And there is always a risk of that in social science. (For a crisp technical discussion of the basic problem and how to partly correct for it in large-N analysis, see Bartels 1996.) But we think that the risk is worth tolerating. History is inscribed everywhere on present-day American politics. How could it not be given that the American regime is well into its third century?

In fact, seeing all of the ways that history is imprinted on contemporary politics means that APD is very much part of the ever-present work of sorting out what is going on currently in American politics. Recognizing that the present moment in American politics has been multiply constituted means that APD scholars can shed very bright light on the historical origins of a quite wide range of contemporary political phenomena. We can explain what some otherwise puzzling current phenomenon is a case of. We are not limited to general remarks about how some facet of American politics arises from the “liberal consensus” or American exceptionalism (although that might be true

at some general level.) Rather, we can specifically state what the phenomenon is a case of, whether it will persist, and why or why not.

To treat an important and much discussed example, when the Tea Party emerged in 2009 Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson quickly saw that this was a recurrence of “federated organization” for civic engagement. The Tea Party echoed an older style of civic engagement, different from the Washington-based advocacy model of professionalized organizations that serve an organizationally inactive, dues-paying membership. The confidence that Skocpol and Williamson had in their hunch meant that they were able to richly confirm it through interview evidence and geocoded data. They were able to offer the *first* in-depth portrait of how the Tea Party works. APD gave them the insight with which they could address a crying professional—and public question—namely, what was the Tea Party? As Skocpol and Williamson showed, journalists had actually been unable to do that and had even offered rather misleading accounts of the phenomenon. APD literally came to the political science debate first in trying to identify the nature, significance, and likely longevity of the Tea Party (Skocpol and Williamson 2012).

## THE IMPORTANCE OF IDENTIFYING “WHAT HAPPENED”—AND DESCRIBING IT WELL

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Two final characteristics, in our view, distinguish APD scholarship: one, that a different fundamental question underlies it more often than in other subfields, and two (and relatedly), that answering this question requires excellent writing—much different than the colorless, cautious prose that we too often learn to write in graduate school.

Certainly APD scholars, like most other political scientists, often ask “why?” As the previous section underscored, we also very much care about investigating “how,” by tracing historical processes that shaped—and shape—American politics. Far more than other types of political science, however, APD *also* wants to know the answer to “what happened?” We alluded to this earlier, when we signaled the importance of “putting history first.”

In the social sciences there is, quite appropriately, very strong interest in theory building and theory testing, and also in refining techniques for causal inference and in progressively ruling out rival explanations for important phenomena. As a scholarly community we often say that political science aspires to *reducing* the generalizations that we have, to the extent that we can do that.

APD, however, has a strong tendency to produce *new* accounts of the links between past and present—and we make no apology for that. In that respect, APD scholars resemble not molecular biologists but plant or insect biologists who identify behaviors and species that no one previously recognized. We seek to find new things that

people have not seen before because we care very much about getting the answer to “what happened?” right.

For example, the American welfare state is often regarded as not particularly generous and as built on allocating stigma for the receipt of social policy benefits beyond the universal programs of Social Security and Medicare. Yet Christopher Howard discovered a “hidden welfare state” in his first book on social policy through tax expenditure (Howard 1997). In turn that led him to reassess and correct a whole range of stylized facts about American social policy in his second book, *The Welfare State Nobody Knows* (Howard 2007). The mantra that programs for poor people are poor programs simply does not stand up. The growth in Medicaid expenditure in recent decades has been extremely robust. Stylized facts about social policy are no substitute for the kind of careful attention to how direct and indirect programs actually work that Howard pioneered.

Consequently much of APD consists of counterintuitive *descriptive inference*. As Keohane writes, “Descriptive inference is not the same as simple description: it involves an inference, from known to unknown, that can be incorrect or otherwise flawed. And both description and descriptive inference often rest on the interpretation of inherently—sometimes deliberately—ambiguous actions” (Keohane 2009, 361).

But to do descriptive inference well means good writing and careful attention to the reliability of the facts one assembles and how one interprets them. We do “thick description” in various sorts of ways—and increasingly with numbers and findings from econometrics. We do description so that we have a more accurate grasp of our past and a rich understanding of the historical processes that have created our present-day politics. Our audience thus is rewarded with seeing something that it had not previously seen.

Once one of us found a prize-winning APD article characterized online as “Wonderful on the details but woefully undertheorized.” The problem with this sort of criticism is that it misses the contribution: the “details” undergird the originality of the piece. “Wonderful” details don’t just aggregate spontaneously like social insects or bacterial “quorum sensing.” An analyst finds them and arranges them in order to *show* what previously could not be seen as readily. That can sometimes require moving theory to the wings of the stage.

Consider what David Mayhew wrote of V. O. Key Jr. “Anyone familiar with Key’s scholarship will be aware of his great capacity to build interesting and persuasive general points through induction: a mastery of detail produces a wealth of proper nouns and telling instances, often accompanied by quantitative data, that march the reader to a conclusion” (Mayhew 2008, 87). This puts the role of good writing in descriptive inference about as succinctly as it can be put.

Description and good writing are sometimes regarded as low-tech and unscientific, no more difficult than, say, developing an R package. But those who have read Ira Katznelson’s multiple award-winning masterpiece, *Fear Itself*, discovered a



confident command of telling and eye-opening particulars. They know the difference that Katznelson's expository authority makes to the power of his book—and to its general lesson that Congress did as much as FDR—if not more—to save American democracy, and to defend political democracy internationally, in the dark decades of the Great Depression and WWII (Katznelson 2014).

The larger point here is that by putting history first and knowing how to convey historical insight on paper APD sharply improves political science. Indeed, we advance a proposition: no APD, no *adequate* study of American politics. A social science that implicitly or explicitly rests on shopworn, stale, or outdated understandings of the political past and its relationships to the present is not—to be blunt—a social science.

The American regime is now well over two centuries old. Doing history well, and correctly, eventually had to be internalized within political science—rather than remaining outsourced to historians. That simply is essential for the study of American politics to continue growing and getting better.

To be sure, Richard John's contribution to this volume underscores that such internalization is far from straightforward and can certainly irritate historians, not least because political scientists are not trained as historians. Indeed, APD scholars need to be mindful of the kinds of concerns that John raises—and we need to be far more self-conscious about the peril of selection bias in how we use secondary sources (Lustick 1996). We also need—as Daniel Galvin's contribution underscores—to be more methodologically self-conscious, borrowing much more than we have from the qualitative methodological revolution. Recent scholarship highlights the importance of bridging the quantitative and qualitative divide in designing and conducting research (e.g., Wawro and Katznelson 2013). But these are precisely the kinds of issues that were certain to surface once APD fully took root. Their emergence indeed underscores the continuing necessity and expanding relevance of the APD approach.

## RESEARCH TRAJECTORIES

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We now encourage readers to discover for themselves how scholars have engaged in APD inquiry by immersing themselves in the rich and diverse array of chapters contributed to this handbook. The first section features essays that consider broad perspectives on APD. Here we include considerations ranging from political economy and political culture to the role of gender and reflections on how an APD lens enables scholars to understand contemporary politics. The second section focuses on institutions, including the various components of the separation of powers at the national level as well as on American federalism, including a focus on cities and states. The third section examines political processes and state–society relations, investigating such topics as representation and political parties to voting rights politics, public opinion, and interest groups. These chapters showcase inventive approaches to studying mass political behavior over

time, often in the absence of ideal data, and they indicate how an historical approach may challenge prevailing views. Finally, the fourth section highlights new work on how the state shapes the status of citizens and regulates society, shaping identities, hierarchies, and social relations in the United States. The foci range from a focus on race to the welfare state and criminal justice to sexual orientation and the family.

As this brief summary indicates, APD scholarship is as lively, varied, and dynamic as the phenomena it investigates. Our discussion of backlash, retrenchment, continuities, recurrence, and cycles suggest the wide assortment of patterns that scholars have identified, to say nothing of the insights of the impossibility theorems (discussed by Jenkins in this volume). Political development might best be thought of—to borrow Paul Pierson's phrase—as, simply, “politics in time” (Pierson 2004).

Our subfield has evolved in a wide array of directions over the past thirty years and in so doing it has invigorated the discipline. It enables scholars to illuminate much about not only the American past but also about how political processes operate and the broad character of the American state and governance. It gives them analytic leverage, moreover, for interpreting contemporary events and politics in real time. And it offers an approach to scholarship with high potential for addressing broad concerns in public affairs and engaging a wide audience including policymakers, journalists, and citizens. In that sense it fulfills one of the most important aspirations of social science, namely that it be broadly useful to and accessible by democratic citizens.

We hope that we have given *you* hope for the promise of your own APD scholarship.

## NOTES

1. A comprehensive bibliography, compiled and updated by David Brian Robertson, can be found at [www.umsl.edu/~robertsondb/sy431bib.html](http://www.umsl.edu/~robertsondb/sy431bib.html)
2. See the very important registry effort at <http://egap.org/about/>. Also Monogan (2015).

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