Studies in American Political Development

cambridge.org/sap

Assessing Exceptionalism: More but Different Cross-National Comparisons

Graham G. Dodds

Department of Political Science, Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec, Canada

Research Article

I am not aware of any conflicts of interest related to this essay.

Cite this article: Dodds GG (2022). Assessing Exceptionalism: More but Different Cross-National Comparisons. *Studies in American Political Development* **36**, 138–140. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898588X22000104

Received: 28 October 2021
Revised: 19 April 2022
Accepted: 22 April 2022

Corresponding author:
Graham Dodds
g.dodds@concordia.ca

Abstract

After the dramatic disruptions of Trump years, American political development might do well to consider whether American exceptionalism still holds or has changed, and that would require scholars to be more attentive to cross-national comparisons and perhaps also to change the countries with which the United States is compared.

Debates about American exceptionalism have long been central to a great deal of scholarship on American political development, with various well-known accounts of America's anomalous welfare state, unusual ideological homogeneity, and atypical policies for medical insurance, child care, and incarceration, among other issues. The identification of and explanation for distinctive or unique features of American politics is likely to remain a core concern for the foreseeable future, as scholars seek to understand whether recent developments have affirmed, annulled, or altered American exceptionalism.

1. Comparison as Central, Necessary, and Pragmatic

The question of American difference relies fundamentally on the use of comparison, to account for whether, how, and—crucially—why the United States is different or exceptional, as compared to other polities that are otherwise fairly similar. For years, some American political development (APD) scholars have been attentive not just to historically based (or diachronic) comparison, but also to cross-national (or international or transnational) comparison; they have sought to situate or contextualize American political phenomena not just via comparison to the American past, but to the non-American world. As Kimberly Morgan notes, "APD was born, in part, out of comparatively driven concerns and it both took inspiration from, and influenced, comparative styles of research."[1] This essay contends that in the years to come, APD's invocation of cross-national comparison should grow but also change.

APD's use of cross-national comparison is but one aspect of the broader question of the relationship between the disciplinary subfields of American politics and comparative politics. Time and again, scholars of various types have called for greater integration of these two fields. In their preface to the first issue of *Studies in American Political Development*, editors Karen Orren and Stephen Skowronek articulated the hope that the journal would be "intradisciplinary" and would connect "scholars working in all corners of political science," including comparative politics.[2] And as Steven White has noted, "This comparative influence wasn't just present at the beginning of the subfield, but rather has persisted in at least some APD scholarship."[3] Indeed, there are numerous prominent works in APD that employ comparative analysis in one way or another.[4] But broadly speaking, APD's comparative connections have not always

[1]Kimberly J. Morgan, "Comparative Politics and American Political Development," in *The Oxford Handbook of American Political Development*, ed. Richard Valelly, Suzanne Mettler, and Robert Lieberman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 166.

[2]Karen Orren and Stephen Skowronek, "Editors' Preface," *Studies in American Political Development* 1 (1986): vii.

[3]Steven White, "What's So American about American Political Development?" *A House Divided*, April 2, 2019. https://ahousedividedapd.com/2019/04/02/whats-so-american-about-american-political-development/.

[4]Major APD works that employ cross-national comparison include (chronologically): Ira Katznelson, *Black Men, White Cities: Race, Politics, and Migration in the United States, 1900–30, and Britain, 1948–68* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973); Theda Skocpol and John Ikenberry, "The Political Formation of the American Welfare State in Historical and Comparative Perspective," in *Comparative Social Research*, Special Issue on the Welfare State, ed. Richard F. Thomasson (Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, 1983), 87–148; Theda Skocpol and Gretchen Ritter, "Gender and the Origins of Modern Social Policies in Britain and the United States," *Studies in American Political Development* 5, no. 1 (1991): 36–93; Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992); Theda Skocpol, "State Formation and Social Policy in the United States," *The American Behavioral Scientist* 35, no. 4-5 (1992): 559–84; Jacob S. Hacker, "The Historical Logic of National Health Insurance: Structure and Sequence in the Development of British, Canadian, and U.S. Medical Policy," *Studies in American Political Development* 12, no. 1 (1998): 57–130; Adam D. Sheingate, *The Rise of the Agricultural Welfare State: Institutions and Interest Group Power in the United States, France, and Japan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); Kathleen Thelen, *How Institutions Evolve: The Political Economy of Skills in Germany, Britain, the United States, and Japan* (New York: Cambridge University

© The Author(s), 2022. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

been as well developed or as systematically articulated as they might be, a shortcoming that has occasioned some criticism over the years. For example, Adam Sheingate has lamented that "the points of connection between APD and other fields are not always clear."[5] Similarly, Morgan urges, "There should be more dialogue between APD and comparative politics."[6] Given the political upheavals of the past few years, the need for a more robust dialogue is now great.

The integration of APD and comparative politics means different things for each of the two sides. For scholars of comparative politics, the challenge is to overcome the traditional tendency to treat the United States as an outlier or *sui generis* and therefore to exclude it. After all, the United States is not always different, and at any rate, it is an important and influential case, so it should not be reflexively neglected in comparative analyses. Broad comparative generalizations that fail to come to terms with the American case are limited and perhaps suspect. As Philippe Schmitter advises, "Comparativists should attempt to include the United States in their research designs when it seems apposite."[7] And Morgan contends, "Studying the United States can move comparative scholars to rethink categories, concepts, and theories."[8]

What does APD stand to benefit from greater connections to comparative politics? The idea that APD should expand its openness to cross-national comparison is hardly novel, and scholars have adduced several different reasons for pursuing it. Crucially, comparison to other countries can indicate just how different the United States really is. Or, as Morgan puts it, "a comparative perspective on the United States highlights that which is unique, or not, about American politics."[9] Similarly, Andrew Roberts argues, "An understanding of foreign politics … can shed light on the American political system." More provocatively, Roberts asserts, "understanding American politics requires understanding places that are not America."[10] Cross-national comparison need not dilute or diminish what is distinctive about American politics, it can help to reveal it and highlight it. As Orren and Skowronek explain, "when politics in the United States is situated against politics in other countries, it is likely that the comparisons will be used to highlight what, if any, problems or characteristics of change are peculiar to the historical configuration of government and politics in the United States. This has important advantages, bringing the United States into sharper relief while guarding against unexamined claims of American exceptionalism."[11]

Another reason for APD to be more aware of the comparative context is the locus of the drivers of development. In 2003, Ira Katznelson claimed that APD had "been paying insufficient attention to international influences on American political development," such as war and trade.[12] More recently, Debra Thompson articulated a similar rationale: "comparative political development is a first and necessary step to understanding the ways in which processes of political development may be shaped by forces that are not confined by territorial boundaries."[13] In other words, insofar as aspects of American politics are driven by factors external to the United States, comparison to other countries is required. And given the contemporary importance of international factors like globalization, climate change, political refugees and mass migration, and the Covid-19 pandemic, attention to the international context is vital.

Beyond the points about the identification of differences and the impact of external causality, considerations of scale and generalizability also point to the benefits of more closely connecting APD with comparative politics. For example, Robert Lieberman has noted that placing American political phenomena in a comparative perspective enables researchers to engage with more data and "to expand variation" and thus be better able to identify causal connections.[14] Peter Swenson has suggested that American institutionalists should extend their analysis to see if it is generalizable or if "it can do more than just explain a series of events in one country."[15] Thompson's study of race indicates that some APD accounts can in fact explain some things outside the United States, so APD scholars who ignore the rest of the world may well be selling their work short or underestimating its reach. As White explains, more closely connecting APD to comparative politics would benefit the latter as well as the former. He claims that when APD is comparative, "it is often comparative with the primary purpose of elucidating America-specific outcomes, rather than generalizing evidence from the United States to larger theoretical debates that are not tied to a specific time or place." Instead, he suggests, it could "emphasize what studies of the United States can contribute to our more general understanding of political development and historical institutionalism, rather than our understanding of America for its own sake."[16]

Last but not least, apart from the several intellectual rationales noted above, there are also more practical reasons for APD to undertake a greater connection to comparative politics. By more closely aligning APD with its bigger and older sibling of historical institutionalism, practitioners of APD can connect with sympathetic scholars and allies in other subfields.[17] And for a sub-subfield that has not always found ready acceptance by the rest of the discipline, the prospect of forging greater connections with numerous external allies is something that APD should pursue enthusiastically, even if it were only for instrumental purposes.[18]

Press, 2004); Robert C. Lieberman, *Shaping Race Policy: The United States in Comparative Perspective* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); Sven Steinmo, *The Evolution of Modern States: Sweden, Japan, and the United States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Paul Frymer, *Building an American Empire: The Era of Territorial and Political Expansion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017); David A. Bateman, *Disenfranchising Democracy: Constructing the Electorate in the United States, the United Kingdom, and France* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[5]Adam Sheingate, "Institutional Dynamics and American Political Development," *Annual Review of Political Science* 17, no. 1 (May 2014): 461.

[6]Morgan, "Comparative Politics," 171.

[7]Philippe C. Schmitter, "Comparative Politics: its Past, Present and Future," *Chinese Political Science Review* 1 (2016): 409.

[8]Morgan, "Comparative Politics," 171.

[9]Ibid., 172.

[10]Andrew L. Roberts, "What Americanists Don't Know About American Politics," *The Forum* 11, no. 2 (August 2013): 95.

[11]Karen Orren and Stephen Skowronek, *The Search for American Political Development* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 7.

[12]Ira Katznelson, "The Possibilities of Analytical Political History," in *The Democratic Experiment*, ed. Meg Jacobs et al. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 388.

[13]Debra Thompson, "Race, the Canadian Census, and Interactive Political Development," *Studies in American Political Development* 34, no. 1 (April 2020): 48; see also Rogan Kersh, "The Growth of American Political Development: The View from the Classroom," *Perspectives on Politics* 3, no. 2 (2005): 339.

[14]Lieberman, *Shaping Race Policy*, 13.

[15]Peter A. Swenson, "Yes, and Comparative Analysis Too: A Rejoinder to Hacker and Pierson," *Studies in American Political Development* 18, no. 2 (October 2004): 197.

[16]White, "What's So American."

[17]Daniel J. Galvin, "Qualitative Methods and American Political Development," *Clio Newsletter of Politics & History* (APSA) 24, no. 1 (Winter 2014): 22; Sheingate, "Institutional Dynamics," 462.

[18]John Gerring, "APD from a Methodological Point of View," *Studies in American Political Development* 17 (2003): 101.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898588X22000104 Published online by Cambridge University Press

While the call for APD to explore more cross-national comparisons might strike some Americanists as overly demanding, akin to having to learn a new language, there are legions of American politics scholars located outside the United States who are well situated to invoke cross-national comparisons. Moreover, many countries beyond the United States have academic associations, journals, and frequent conferences devoted to the study of American politics, many of which welcome historically informed scholarship, and most major American academic associations occasionally hold their annual conferences abroad. In short, as a practical matter it would not be difficult for APD to increase its use of cross-national comparisons.

2. Different Comparisons

Arguments like those above are familiar to many in the big tent of APD, but recent developments may have altered their appeal. Over the last several years, the United States has experienced dramatically widening economic inequality, increased political polarization, the erosion of basic democratic norms, significant political violence, and questions about the capacity and durability of the state. Many observers have asked how such things could have occurred in the United States and whether they are a mere aberration, an indication that long-held understandings of American politics and governance were mistaken, or evidence that the United States has fundamentally changed—questions that APD should be well positioned to answer. But given those remarkable developments, can even an enhanced use of cross-national comparison yield insight into the American case?

More comparison can indeed be a great help for the reasons noted above, but the recent changes in the American political landscape may require a different sort of comparison. In the canonical comparativist terms of John Stuart Mill, this might entail some creative toggling between the methods of difference and agreement, as longstanding similarities have dissipated and minor differences have become stark divergences. Alternatively, perhaps what is needed is a new set of comparables: Given the changes in the United States, the countries with which the United States might be profitably compared have also changed. Traditionally, insofar as scholars of American politics were willing to consider other countries, the usual suspects were other developed (or even postindustrial) countries with liberal democracies, such as Canada, the United Kingdom, most of Western Europe, and Australia and New Zealand. But the disruptions of the past several years have arguably altered the universe of other cases with which the United States can be compared. As Sheingate has argued, APD must accept "moving beyond well-worn comparisons between the United States and the advanced industrialized countries of Western Europe."[19]

A few examples may be instructive. Even casual observers of American political economy know that the United States has experienced a sharp increase in economic inequality, but it now has significantly higher levels of economic inequality than any other G-7 country and most Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, and it is on par with Argentina, Ivory Coast, Turkey, and Malaysia.[20] In terms of political polarization, while some Western democracies have recently experienced a decrease, the United States has experienced a sharp increase and is now significantly more polarized than other OECD countries.[21] On measures of democratic efficacy, the United States has declined in terms of trust in political institutions, government function, and freedom of expression, and it is now outranked by two dozen countries around the world.[22] In terms of general satisfaction with democracy, the United States has experienced a decrease and now ranks below Mexico, Brazil, and Turkey.[23] And when it comes to political violence and instability, the United States is currently near the bottom quartile globally, roughly at the same level as Algeria, Honduras, the Philippines, and Myanmar.[24]

Some of those comparisons may be surprising or alarming, and the idea of profitably comparing the United States to countries like Turkey or Honduras might strike some scholars as bizarre. But, *ceteris paribus*, accurate and informative cross-national comparison has little tolerance for national prejudices. APD scholars and other Americanists may just have to get used to comparisons with countries that the United States had long perceived itself as incomparably different from, or even in some sense superior to, but that it now appears to resemble closely. And if the United States does not truly belong in such company, good comparative work will surely demonstrate that.

3. Conclusion

In 2003, Katznelson said of APD's alleged neglect of cross-national attention, "There is a massive missed chance here."[25] Two decades later, that opportunity has still not been fully explored. Of the roughly 400 articles, research notes, and scholarly exchanges that *SAPD* has published since its inception, only twenty (i.e., 5 percent) have had a significant non-American comparative component. However, in 2020 the *SAPD* editors declared their "hope to publish more work that situates the United States in a comparative perspective."[26] Thus, it seems that the time is ripe for APD to enhance its connections to comparative politics. And greater openness to comparison will be essential if we are to understand the impact of the Trump era on American exceptionalism. Only if APD engages with more cross-national comparisons and is willing to adjust those comparisons in light of recent developments will it be able to ascertain whether American exceptionalism is enduring, eroding, or evolving.

[19]Sheingate, "Institutional Dynamics," 474.

[20]Anshu Siripurapu, "The U.S. Inequality Debate," *Backgrounder*, Council on Foreign Relations, July 15, 2020, https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/us-inequality-debate; Juliana Menasce Horowitz, Ruth Igielnik, and Rakesh Kochhar, "Most Americans Say There Is Too Much Economic Inequality in the U.S., but Fewer Than Half Call It a Top Priority," Pew Research Center, January 9, 2020, https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/01/09/most-americans-say-there-is-too-much-economic-inequality-in-the-u-s-but-fewer-than-half-call-it-a-top-priority/.

[21]Levi Boxwell, Matthew Gentzkow, and Jesse M. Shapiro, "Cross-Country Trends in Affective Polarization," NBER Working Paper Series, August 2021, https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w26669/w26669.pdf; Michael Dimock and Richard Wike, "American Is Exceptional in the Nature of Its Political Divide," Pew Research Center, November 13, 2020, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/11/13/america-is-exceptional-in-the-nature-of-its-political-divide/.

[22]Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), *Democracy Index 2020: In Sickness and in Health?* (New York: EIU, 2021), 43–44, https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2020/.

[23]Richard Wike and Shannon Schumacher, "Democratic Rights Popular Globally but Commitment to Them Not Always Strong," Pew Research Center, February 27, 2020, https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/02/27/democratic-rights-popular-globally-but-commitment-to-them-not-always-strong/.

[24]Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP), *Global Peace Index: Measuring Peace in a Complex World* (Sydney: IEP, June 2021), 10, https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/GPI-2021-web-1.pdf.

[25]Katznelson, "The Possibilities of Analytical Political History," 389.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898588X22000104 Published online by Cambridge University Press