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American Political Development as a Problem-Driven Enterprise

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Research Article

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Abstract

We argue that American political development's (APD's) relentless preoccupation with the substantive problems that shape and animate American politics and how they emerge and develop over time has been a key source of the subfield's durability. We elaborate on three main payoffs to conceptualizing APD as a problem-driven enterprise: (1) it highlights APD's main comparative advantage within the American politics subfield, noting the tremendous agility APD's substantive breadth lends the enterprise; (2) it resolves the methodological debate, granting simply that the question chooses the method rather than the other way around; and (3) it reorients the critique: simply because a subfield considers itself to be problem-oriented does not mean that it is identifying the right problems to study.

We detect a note of despair in the editors' call for essays for this issue. The despair centers around the supposed inability of American political development (APD) perspectives developed in the "penumbra of the postwar U.S." to travel in ways that help us grapple with contemporary concerns.[1] Of course, any healthy research agenda must provide space for reconsidering and/or recalibrating its earlier theoretical assumptions and methodological commitments. Yet rather than despair, our read on recent APD work is far more optimistic.

In our view, the field has been quite responsive to contemporary democratic challenges, both in relation to other subfields of American politics and on its own terms. While the momentous events of the past five years may have caught other disciplines, subfields, and analytic approaches to the study of American politics off guard, APD scholars have been well-positioned to address them, deftly using well-honed conceptual frameworks and analytical tools to make sense of a changing world. They have used historical and comparative analysis and pattern identification to better understand present challenges to democracy;[2] conducted penetrating analyses of the deep institutional and ideational tensions at the root of contemporary governing crises;[3] examined how powerful interest groups can cultivate and politicize group social identities and structure the policy debate in ways that advantage their interests and augment their political power;[4] and excavated recurrent and enduring struggles over multiracial democracy in ways that link to recent and ongoing political movements, divisions, and events.[5]

Despite regular handwringing within the subfield, APD continued to churn out high-quality research addressing some of the most pressing issues of our time, from rising income inequality[6] to right-wing populism[7] to changing gender dynamics[8] to partisan polarization

[1]*Studies in American Political Development,* "Call for Short Articles Addressing the State of the Field" July 9, 2021, Twitter.com, https://twitter.com/StudiesAPD/status/1413572637834588164?s=20&t=X1jEss0mhgGH509WfJ8WCg.

[2]Suzanne Mettler and Robert Lieberman, *Four Threats: The Recurring Crises of American Democracy* (New York: St. Martin's, 2020); Robert Lieberman, Suzanne Mettler, Thomas B. Pepinsky, Kenneth M. Roberts, and Richard Valelly, "The Trump Presidency and American Democracy: A Historical and Comparative Analysis," *Perspectives on Politics* 17, no. 2 (2019): 470–79.

[3]Stephen Skowronek, John A. Dearborn, and Desmond King, *Phantoms of a Beleaguered Republic: The Deep State and The Unitary Executive* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021); Zachary Callan and Philip Rocco, eds., *American Political Development and the Trump Presidency* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020).

[4]Matthew J. Lacombe, *Firepower: How the NRA Turned Gun Owners Into a Political Force* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021).

[5]Megan Ming Francis, "The Strange Fruit of American Political Development," *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 6, no. 1 (2018): 128–37; Debra Thompson and Chloe Thurston, "American Political Development in an Era of Black Lives Matter," *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 6, no. 1 (2018): 116–19; Rogers Smith and Desmond King, "White Protectionism in America," *Perspectives on Politics* 19, no. 2 (2021): 460–78; Kimberley Johnson, "Today's Election Denialism and Violence Has a Dark Echo in the Jim Crow South," *Washington Post*, January 15, 2021, sec. Monkey Cage. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/01/15/todays-election-denialism-violence-has-dark-echo-jim-crow-south/.

[6]Jacob S. Hacker, and Paul Pierson, *Winner-Take-All Politics: How Washington Made the Rich Richer—and Turned Its Back on the Middle Class* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010).

[7]Jacob S. Hacker, and Paul Pierson. *Let Them Eat Tweets: How the Right Rules in an Age of Extreme Inequality* (New York: Liveright, 2020); Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson, *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[8]Deondra Rose, *Citizens by Degree: Higher Education Policy and the Changing Gender Dynamics of American Citizenship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); Eileen McDonagh, "Political Citizenship and Democratization: The Gender Paradox," *American Political Science Review* 96, no. 3 (2002): 535–52.

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and ideological realignment[9] to the growth of the carceral state[10] to the rise of right-wing power brokers[11] to the construction of racial and class-based segregation in U.S. cities[12] to the transformation of political campaigns[13] to fundamental and ongoing fights about voting rights.[14]

Why, then, the sense of despair? If APD's successes in addressing pressing questions have been overlooked, perhaps it is because debates about methods and concepts obscure a more foundational issue: the underlying assumption that we are all in agreement about what APD is. Are we? Is APD held together by some methodological commitment (qualitative, historical, or temporal work)? By a focus on the state or society, or on shifts in, or clashes over, governing authority? By an effort to pin down change and to describe its drivers? Is APD simply political history? And where do "modern tools of social science" (to use the language of historical political economy) fit into APD?

For almost as long as it has been written about as a coherent subfield, APD scholars have expressed concerns over the definition, purpose, and future of the field.[15] In truth, much of this debate has been methodological, having to do with the "fit" of qualitative and historically oriented research in an American politics subfield that has tended to sideline such approaches.

What these periodic methodological and theoretical debates have overlooked, in other words, is precisely what has made APD such a durable and indispensable part of the American politics canon and such an attractive and welcoming home for so many scholars for over four decades: its relentless preoccupation with the *substantive problems* that shape and animate American politics—such as those listed above—and how they emerge and develop over time.

APD's dogged focus on substantive problems and their underlying temporal dynamics has lent the field an unusual degree of resilience and adaptability as the discipline has undergone multiple methodological and analytical "revolutions" in recent decades. While other analytic approaches and research traditions have risen and fallen in popularity, APD researchers have continued to do what they do best: probe the origins and development of major political problems; explain the timing, content, and form of substantively important outcomes; and use history to shed light on our present discontents.

We do not intend to dismiss the editors' anxieties. To the contrary: emphasizing the problem-driven core of the APD enterprise may help to respond to the concerns raised. Beyond circumventing the endless soul-searching debates, we see three main payoffs to conceptualizing APD as a problem-driven enterprise: (1) it highlights APD's main comparative advantage within the American politics subfield, noting the tremendous agility APD's substantive breadth lends the enterprise; (2) it resolves the methodological debate, granting simply that the question chooses the method rather than the other way around; and (3) it reorients the critique: just because a subfield considers itself to be problem-oriented does not mean that it is identifying the right problems to study. We address each of these in turn.

First, quite unlike other subfields, APD does not privilege a fixed set of substantive topics or institutional arenas. While other corners of the American politics subfield can be more easily identified by their topic (e.g., elections, immigration, public opinion) or institutional arena (e.g., Congress, presidency, state politics), APD spans the whole of American politics and government. It is a substantive inquiry that "covers the full range of politics in the United States."[16] Indeed, many APD scholars are known as generalists, and many self-identify as scholars of cross-cutting topics (e.g., political economy, social policy, racial inequality). This scope and breadth enables scholars working in the APD tradition to track problems as they emerge and unfold, keep abreast of new developments, and identify new puzzles worthy of investigation. This is particularly important because for the most part, real-world problems do not conveniently operate within the disciplinary silos political scientists have created to study their fields.

Second, defining APD as a problem-driven enterprise offers an alternative to thinking about APD in terms of its methods. Scholars working in the APD tradition have long been committed to the proposition that there are multiple ways to advance knowledge and understanding. Consequently, APD scholarship has always been methodologically pluralistic: the question chooses the method rather than the other way around. Rather than addressing every new question with the same cookie cutter approach, problem-focused APD research tackles problems as they arise and selects the most appropriate method for addressing the question at hand. A crucial consequence of this pluralistic outlook is that APD is not constrained by causal orthodoxy. While many APD researchers do pursue causal explanation, they equally value concept development, pattern identification, and the discovery of significant new findings.[17] This methodological open-mindedness has proven to be an asset, lending APD resiliency within a discipline that is otherwise in a state of perpetual turmoil and discord over methods. New methods and analytical tools come and go, but problem-driven, substantively oriented,

[9]Sam Rosenfeld, *The Polarizers: Postwar Architects of Our Partisan Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018); Eric Schickler, *Racial Realignment: The Transformation of American Liberalism, 1932–1965* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016); Keneshia N. Grant, *The Great Migration and the Democratic Party: Black Voters and the Realignment of American Politics in the 20th Century* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2020).

[10]Naomi Murakawa, *The First Civil Right: How Liberals Built Prison America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[11]Alexander Hertel-Fernandez, "Policy Feedback as Political Weapon: Conservative Advocacy and the Demobilization of the Public Sector Labor Movement," *Perspectives on Politics* 16, no. 2 (June 2018): 364–79.

[12]Jessica Trounstine, *Segregation by Design: Local Politics and Inequality in American Cities* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[13]Adam D. Sheingate, *Building a Business of Politics: The Rise of Political Consulting and the Transformation of American Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[14]David A. Bateman, *Disenfranchising Democracy: Constructing the Electorate in the United States, the United Kingdom, and France* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Jesse Rhodes, *Ballot Blocked: The Political Erosion of the Voting Rights Act* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017).

[15]John Gerring, "APD from a Methodological Point of View," *Studies in American Political Development* 17, no. 1 (2003): 82–102; Karen Orren and Stephen Skowronek, *The Search for American Political Development* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Rogan Kersh, "Rethinking Periodization? APD and the Macro-History of the United States," *Polity* 37, no. 4 (2005): 513–22; Paul Pierson, "The Costs of Marginalization," *Comparative Political Studies* 40, no. 2 (2007): 145–69; Adam Sheingate, "Institutional Dynamics and American Political Development," *Annual Review of Political Science* 17, no. 1 (2014): 461–77; Daniel J. Galvin, "Qualitative Methods and American Political Development" in *Oxford Handbook of American Political Development*, ed. Richard Valelly, Suzanne Mettler, and Robert Lieberman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), vol. 1; Daniel Galvin, "Let's Not Conflate APD with Political History, and Other Reflections on 'Causal Inference and American Political Development,'" *Public Choice* 185, no. 3–4 (2020): 485–500; Jeffery A. Jenkins, Nolan McCarty, and Charles Stewart, "Learning from Each Other: Causal Inference and American Political Development," *Public Choice* 185, no. 3–4 (2020): 245–51.

[16]Orren and Skowronek, *The Search for American Political Development*, 1.

[17]Galvin, "Qualitative Methods and American Political Development."

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historically informed, and theoretically minded research in the APD mold seems here to stay.

Finally, viewing APD as fundamentally concerned with the substantive problems that shape and animate American politics productively reorients our concerns and criticism. Where APD may fall short is in attention to certain problems, not in theoretical or methodological sophistication. How do we ensure that the field is staying alert to new problems? That we are addressing the right ones? For too long, the field neglected important topics that have only recently gained attention. The study of the welfare state, for example, long privileged top-down, elite-driven perspectives while neglecting bottom-up perspectives.[18] Concerns about the changing quality of democratic governance have until recently neglected the long process and mechanisms of state-level democratic subversion.[19] Scholars have similarly long neglected the study of race-class subjugated communities and the coercive, repressive, and predatory governing practices to which their citizens are subjected, as well as the political lives of those residing therein.[20] Indeed, while we know more than before about the power of billionaires, plutocrats, and demagogues to deepen social divisions, exacerbate labor market distortions, and fortify their positions, we still have much to learn about the political dynamics at the other end of the spectrum—at the very bottom of the income scale—where marginalized workers have been challenging, with growing effectiveness, the legitimacy of the economic and political systems that so many Americans take for granted.[21]

In short, to the extent that APD is seen as caught off guard by recent developments, we think the critique is likely overstated and misdirected. Overstated because, as we have shown, the subfield has done a fine job of redirecting its attention to new developments of contemporary concern. And misdirected because rather than asking whether we are using the right frameworks or methods, we should be asking ourselves whether we are asking the right questions and identifying the right problems.

It is reasonable and necessary to be concerned with how to position the field over the long term. But theoretical and analytical approaches should follow from problems that are identified for study—rather than determine what gets studied in the first place. Conceptualizing APD as a problem-driven enterprise—zeroing in on what APD has done *well* over the last forty years—improves our ability to do this by prioritizing the substantive questions that have lent APD its greatest resiliency and strength.

[18]Jamila Michener, *Fragmented Democracy: Medicaid, Federalism, and Unequal Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Chloe N. Thurston, *At the Boundaries of Homeownership: Credit, Discrimination, and the American State* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Jamila Michenor, Mallory SoRelle, and Chloe Thurston, "From the Margins to the Center: A Bottom-Up Approach to Welfare State Scholarship," *Perspectives on Politics* 20, no. 1 (2022): 154–69.

[19]Jacob Grumbach, *Laboratories against Democracy: How National Policies Transformed State Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022).

[20]Joe Soss and Vesla Weaver, "Police Are Our Government: Politics, Political Science, and the Policing of Race–Class Subjugated Communities," *Annual Review of Political Science* 20, no. 1 (2017): 565–91.

[21]Thurston, *At the Boundaries of Homeownership*; Michener, *Fragmented Democracy*; Daniel J. Galvin, "Alt-Labor's Turn Toward Politics and Public Policy to Combat the Exploitation of Low-Wage Workers: Building Power and 'Punching Above Their Weight,'" *Economic Policy Institute* (Washington, DC, 2021); Daniel J. Galvin, "Alt-Labor: Low-Wage Workers and the New Politics of Workers' Rights" (unpublished manuscript).

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