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American Political Development in Dark Times

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Abstract

This short article assesses the current "state of the field" in light of recent political events. I argue that the focus of American political development (APD) on both time and institutional conflict makes it a valuable approach for theorizing about the trajectory of American politics.

Research Article

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Research from the American political development (APD) perspective foregrounds the political effects of both time and institutional conflict.[1] The formative impact of movement through time is explained through scholarship focusing on the creation, perpetuation, erosion, and (sometimes) recurrence of ideas or institutions integral to the functioning of American democracy. Political developments during the second decade of the twenty-first century have revealed the fragility of many ostensibly durable features of the American system. A methodology that begins by treating ideas and institutions as diachronic is well-suited to help diagnose the potential impact of those emergent political forces that are degrading American democracy. APD also tracks the conflicts that occur between institutional arrangements that have outlasted the people who created them and the political problems they were designed to solve. As institutions accumulate, they frequently operate at cross-purposes.[2] The simultaneous but disharmonious interaction of multiple institutional arrangements engenders formative political conflicts. Attempting to solve many of the problems we confront today, and are likely to confront in the future, will lead to conflicts of this kind. It is important to understand where these conflicts might occur and how they could play out. For this reason, too, APD remains highly relevant for scholars interested in making sense of the course and direction of American politics.

One way in which contemporary APD scholarship examines time's "independent influence on political change" is through close attention to the fragility of democratic institutions and processes within the United States.[3] For one group of scholars, Donald Trump's presidency was a warning sign indicating the kind of "regime fragility" that presages "democratic backsliding and breakdowns."[4] Traditionally used to explore the reversion of newly established democracies back to their nondemocratic origins, "backsliding" describes the gradual degradation of democracy without whole-scale regime change.[5] In 2017, for example, a different group of scholars warned that the United States may be moving toward "'competitive authoritarianism'—a system in which meaningful democratic institutions exist yet the government abuses state power to disadvantage its opponents."[6] It is shocking to live through democratic erosion of this kind. Yet research in APD attending to the political and social status of black Americans should temper our surprise that backsliding is possible within the United States.

For black Americans, democracy has never been durable. Kate Masur's recent analysis shows that over the seventy-two years between ratification and secession, white officials outside the South revoked black voting rights where they had existed, outlawed manumission of

[1]APD, like most "historical institutionalist studies focus[es] on the interplay of specific structuring institutions—quite variously defined—and the actions of specific political agents over substantial periods of time." Rogers Smith, "Substance and Methods in APD Research," *Studies in American Political Development* 17 (Spring 2003): 111–15; 111.

[2]For more on this point, see Karen Orren and Stephen Skowronek, *The Search for American Political Development* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 113–19; Robert C. Lieberman, "Ideas, Institutions, and Political Order: Explaining Political Change," *American Political Science Review* 96 (December 2002): 697–712; Suzanne Mettler and Richard M. Vallely, "Introduction: The Distinctiveness and Necessity of American Political Development," in Richard M. Vallely, Suzanne Mettler, and Robert C. Lieberman, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of American Political Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 13.

[3]Orren and Skowronek, *The Search for American Political Development*, 4.

[4]Robert C. Lieberman, Suzanne Mettler, Thomas B. Pepinsky, Kenneth M. Roberts, and Richard Vallely, "The Trump Presidency and American Democracy: A Historical and Comparative Analysis," *Perspectives on Politics* 17 (June 2019), 470–79; 471.

[5]David Waldner and Ellen Lust, "Unwelcome Change: Coming to Terms with Democratic Backsliding," *Annual Review of Political Science* 21 (May 2018): 93–113; Gero Erdmann, "Decline of Democracy: Loss of Quality, Hybridisation, and the Breakdown of Democracy," in Gero Erdmann and Marianne Kneuer, eds., *Regression of Democracy?* (Wiesbaden, Germany: VS Verlag, 2011); Nancy Bermeo, "On Democratic Backsliding," *Journal of Democracy* 27 (January 2016): 5–19; Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2018).

[6]Robert Mickey, Steven Levitsky, and Lucan Ahmad Way. "Is America Still Safe for Democracy?" *Foreign Affairs*, April 2017, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2017-04-17/america-still-safe-democracy.

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slaves, and barred black participation on juries.[7] Free black citizens living in the United States experienced democratic backsliding for decades prior to the beginning of the American Civil War. During and after the war, Republicans in Congress enacted landmark reforms aimed at protecting the rights and liberties of freed people. The constitutional revolution that occurred between 1861–1875 represents the first true effort to establish a multiracial democracy in the United States. After 1875, however, this effort collapsed. Resurgent Democrats, aided by acquiescent members of the GOP, repealed, degraded, or simply ignored Reconstruction-era legal enactments.[8] Over the following century "subnational authoritarianism," protected by outright terrorism, took root in the southeast.[9] A less violent but just as oppressive Jim Crow regime was enforced outside the ex-Confederacy.[10] Not until America's "second reconstruction" did black Americans once again experience democratic advance.[11]

APD scholarship focusing on the history of black civil rights in this country illustrates how movement through time undermines democracy. This research shows that periods characterized by the broadening of democracy have always been followed by retrenchment—progress counteracted by reversal. Democratic backsliding is a recurrent feature of the American regime, but it has been experienced most acutely by the black minority. Political trends over the twenty-first century suggest, however, that the degrading force of time is now being felt by a broader segment of the American population. APD scholars who explore prior episodes of democratic backsliding in the United States are well-suited to provide insights into how democratic institutions can be reinforced so that they last.

It is also likely that political change in the twenty-first century will be driven by disharmonies between long-standing features of our political system and new institutions created to address novel problems. To effectively mitigate the worst impacts of global climate change, for example, coordinated international action is necessary. Yet international politics continues to be organized around nation-states, each of which pursues its own domestic priorities even when doing so comes at the expense of the "global" common good.[12] Here we see a very clear misalignment between the scale of the problem being confronted and the institutional arrangements we have inherited for dealing with it. The Paris Agreement tries to address this misalignment by proposing a "Conference of Parties" through which signatories can "adopt rules, modalities, and procedures" to guide national emissions policies.[13] Yet there exists no mechanism for integrating policies made in this kind of international setting with durable features of the domestic regime, like the two-party system or the division of constitutional authority between Congress and the presidency. As a consequence, we face a high likelihood of conflict between domestic and international political institutions.

Conflict of this kind institutions presents APD scholars with a dilemma and an opportunity. Ira Katznelson points out that APD scholars, like most Americanists, pay "insufficient attention to the international influences" on domestic politics.[14] We are, as a result, largely without theories that might otherwise help us anticipate what will happen when international problems or institutions put pressure on the domestic system. The absence of scholarly attention to this subject is surprising because the United States has now played a hegemonic role in global politics for more than three decades. It is problematic because issues like climate change, migration, international capital flows, and the spread of populism make clear just how significantly the "outside" world creates domestic political conflict. APD scholars have an opportunity to contribute meaningful scholarship in this area because central to the APD perspective is the view that significant political change follows from the friction produced when various "instruments of governance" collide with one another.[15] It is therefore in keeping with APD to identify patterns that could emerge when durable aspects of the domestic regime come into conflict with the imperatives of international politics.

Recent political events have alerted scholars, journalists, and concerned citizens to the fact that the United States has not transcended history. Serious questions are now being asked about the durability of institutions and practices integral to American democracy. APD may locate its origins in the political settlements that came out of the New Deal and World War II, but that does not mean the tools and perspectives brought to bear by APD scholars are ill-suited to address modern political problems. Indeed, one central aspect of APD is a skeptical view of those who claim that our system tends toward equilibrium and stability. The post–World War II order was, in other words, always likely to face unanticipated challenges. APD draws out "sources of disorder," and it introduces "incongruity and fragmentation into depictions of the political norm"[16] Time's degrading effects and the conflict of older and newer instruments of governance are two salient sources of disorder. To consider the trajectory of American politics in light of these forces—to fully examine American political life in a moment characterized by discordance, disequilibrium, and conflict—the APD perspective is more necessary than ever.

[7]Kate Masur, *Until Justice Be Done: America's First Civil Rights Movement From the Revolution to Reconstruction* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2021).

[8]The literature examining civil rights politics through the Civil War and Reconstruction periods is enormous. My thinking here is most directly informed by, W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (1935; repr., New York: Atheneum, 1992); William Gillette, *Retreat from Reconstruction, 1869–1879* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1979); Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989); David A. Bateman, Ira Katznelson, and John S. Lapinski, *Southern Nation: Congress and White Supremacy After Reconstruction* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018); Jeffery A. Jenkins and Justin Peck, *Congress and the First Civil Rights Era, 1861–1918* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021).

[9]Edward L. Gibson, *Boundary Control: Subnational Authoritarianism in Federal Democracies* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Robert M. Mickey, *Paths Out of Dixie: The Democratization of Authoritarian Enclaves in America's Deep South, 1944–1972* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

[10]Kimberly Johnson, *Reforming Jim Crow: Southern Politics and State in the Age Before Brown* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Megan Ming Francis, *Civil Rights and the Making of the Modern American State* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

[11]Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America, 1945–1990,* 2nd ed. (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1991); Richard M. Valley, *The Two Reconstructions: The Struggle for Black Enfranchisement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

[12]For more on this point, see Kim Stanley Robinson, "A Climate Plan for a World in Flames," *Financial Times*, August 20, 2021, https://www.ft.com/content/ff94df96-b702-4e01-addd-f4253d0eecf6.

[13]The Paris Agreement is available here: https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/english_paris_agreement.pdf.

[14]Ira Katznelson, "The Possibilities of Analytical Political History," in Meg Jacobs, William J. Novak, Julian E. Zelizer, eds., *The Democratic Experiment: New Directions in American Political History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 388.

[15]Orren and Skowronek, *The Search for American Political Development*, 113.

[16]Orren and Skowronek, *The Search for American Political Development*, 14.

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