

ONE

The Historical Construction of Politics

The circumstances which accompany the birth of nations and contribute to their development affect the whole term of their being.

Alexis de Tocqueville

THE STUDY OF AMERICAN POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT is a substantive inquiry guided by a theoretical precept. The substantive inquiry covers the full range of politics in the United States: past politics and present politics, political action and political behavior, political thought and political culture, movement politics and institutional politics. The theoretical precept is this: because a polity in all its different parts is constructed historically, over time, the nature and prospects of any single part will be best understood within the long course of political formation. Studying politics through history is nothing new; adherents to a developmental approach spurred the formation of political science as an academic discipline at the end of the nineteenth century. However, after several decades during which history was relegated to a decidedly minor role in the study of American politics, interest in historical approaches is resurgent. Recent years have seen the rise of a veritable cottage industry of political scientists engaged in historical investigations of one kind or another, and for the first time, we hear American political development referred to as “APD,” a subfield with its own name and acronym.

Why this new attraction to Clio? One explanation is that political scientists stepped into a void left when younger academic historians who specialized in the United States turned away from the study of government and leadership to concentrate on other things.¹ There may be some truth to this. Though historians do not depend on

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government for material to analyze, political scientists do rely on history; arguably, then, when historians discovered other, less-well-attended interests, political scientists were obliged to undertake the necessary spade work for themselves. But the circumstances go deeper. Political scientists were drawn to American history first of all by events in the polity itself. The revival of interest in America's political development coincided with the "movement culture" of the last third of the twentieth century, with popular mobilizations, one upon another, that challenged long-established social relations and called for a new inventory of America's political resources. Associated with these were insurgencies within the major political parties, first from the left and then from the right, that undercut the received wisdom of liberal consensus and thrust the legitimacy of American state institutions to the center of political controversy. The quandaries presented by this fast-moving scene prompted scholars to step back for a longer view.

Not surprisingly, they began to see things in a new way. The theory of American politics dominant in the middle of the twentieth century had offered explanations for its stability and continuity; under the sway of "group-process" or "pluralist" ideas, political scientists had distinguished American government by the ease with which its institutions accommodated changes in society and by the seamless precedence of its liberal ideology. Pluralist scholarship postulated an American state open and responsive to interest pressures, an American society only loosely attached to legal foundations, an American Constitution ultimately dependent on informal "rules of the game," rules that, at the level of the individual citizen, sanctioned the operations of the existing system. In the unsettled decades that followed, historical research was enlisted in the service of a theoretical critique. The first matter of intellectual business was to bring to light what the reigning synthesis had missed, and for anyone who cared to look at the past in this way, there was much to be found. Scholars attuned to the discord between state and society discovered the persistence of ancient institutions, impervious to social pressures; scholars attuned to the vicissitudes of society discovered the impositions of formal authority; scholars suspicious of the rules of the game and of

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liberalism discovered an extensive record of ideological conflict, quashed alternatives, and broken promises.

The force of this critique shaped the study of APD as we find it today. Texts setting forth these broad revisionist themes became the canonic works of the new subfield.² They suggested new lines of inquiry into the past, inquiries into the politics of state formation, identity formation, welfare provision, sectional relations, race relations, and cultural antagonism generally. They also encouraged political scientists to move investigations close to the ground, to delve into the intricacies of political conflict and governmental operations in particular historical settings. The result has been the rapid accumulation of a broad-based historical literature on American politics and government, a literature that aspires to meet contemporary standards of research in the disciplines of history and political science. Propositions are now more subtle and exacting; findings are more fully documented; claims are more methodologically secure. Skepticism toward grand theoretical systems of all kinds continues to drive APD's advance, but what has been lacking in synthesis has been compensated for thus far by the new topics addressed, the new techniques applied, and the new findings of substance.

The future is another matter. A theoretical critique may substitute for a positive research program for a while, but it is unlikely to do so indefinitely. The outstanding question is just how long this subfield can sustain itself as an open-ended, freewheeling interrogation of historical dynamics and the causes of past political episodes. One aspect of this question is whether such an enterprise can hold its own amid the research agendas that currently anchor history and political science departments separately – whether historically minded political scientists can resist being pulled more directly into the orbit of scholarly communities boasting a more positive sense of purpose. The other side of the same issue is whether APD, as it is currently practiced, augurs any fresh and coherent statement about the nature of politics itself, a statement of its own that can be readily understood as such even by those who think about politics and history differently.

On all counts, there is reason for concern. Though political scientists are doing more, and arguably better, historical research on

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American politics, the bonds forged of a common critique of prior thinking are getting weaker, and the insights being offered are becoming more localized and dispersed. Scholars formulate historical propositions that are more subtle and exacting, but they have less to say than scholars in earlier generations about the development of the American polity overall. Until recently, the study of American political development offered research strategies and concepts for reaching general insights afforded by longer time horizons; that was its comparative strength as an approach to political analysis. Currently, as APD research begins to look more like work in the rest of political science and the rest of history, its distinctive contribution is becoming less clear. Indeed, at a time when social, economic, and strategic conditions – a “new” multiculturalism, a “new” globalism, a “new” U.S. hegemony – all but trumpet the irrelevance of America’s past, the absence of more comprehensive thinking about the relationship between past and present is conspicuous and might well be counted the most serious shortcoming in APD’s recent revival.

Our hope is that this little book will recapture the enduring value of research into America’s political development, that it will add some forward thrust to the enterprise and recommend its further elaboration as a field. The aim is to tap the fuller significance of ongoing research in the context of an overall reassessment of the APD project. By “fuller significance,” we have in mind what it is that APD might teach us about how past and present politics are connected, by what bridges or processes; about how time comes to exert an independent influence on political change, apart from the notion that time “passes”; about how these things illuminate the nature of American politics, including whether, and in what sense, it may be said to “develop.”

The discussion framed by these questions is primarily conceptual in nature, an effort to characterize a mode of inquiry, cull its common themes, identify its current problems, and suggest responsive solutions. Research on the substantive side of APD is, as we have indicated, alive and well; what we add to that is largely incidental to our main interest in capitalizing on insights to be found in the existing empirical literature, in extending the implications of what

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scholarship in the field has recently brought into view. Moreover, though we strive for a general statement about the field of American political development, we do not present our own full-blown theory of American political development, offering instead a survey of the ground on which theory building might now profitably proceed and a preliminary road map as to where. As was once said of English lawyers, today's APD scholars work for the most part "with their heads down," immersed in the puzzles before them. We have taken the liberty of drawing out from their efforts a presentation we hope will be useful to anyone who wants to think about politics historically.

History and Change

The boundaries of the APD project are porous – receptive to influences from the rest of political science, from the other social science disciplines, and beyond. No membership card is required to participate; indeed, it is common for individual researchers to move closer to the central concerns of APD in one study and far afield in the next. This openness to other areas and the ease of movement and exchange across related inquiries have been important, continually informing and enriching the APD enterprise. But this book is not about the interests APD shares with other research programs or about the potential, however real, for mutual enrichment; it is about APD's own core features. To bring the enterprise into sharper relief and provide an overview of issues to be pursued in later chapters, the remainder of these introductory remarks survey what we take to be the distinguishing marks of research into America's political development.

For instance, the characteristic that most readily identifies APD scholars among other political scientists is their dedication to analyzing American politics through intensive research in American history. What do they expect to find there? Are they closet historians who somehow ended up in the wrong Ph.D. program, or are they after something in particular?

The answer likely to gain the widest assent from scholars who identify with the APD project is that they hope to learn more than

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is already known about how, and with what effect, American politics changes over time. As is often the case with simple answers, this one will require further explanation to be meaningful, but even by itself, it should dispose of any idea that practitioners study history for background, because they think the political issues presented in the past are somehow more interesting or important than the issues of our own day, or because every theory of politics necessarily refers to history, if only for data to analyze and test theory against. The answer might serve also as a preliminary characterization of APD as a “theory-driven” enterprise. APD does not use history as a grab bag of examples; it does not approach the past as a benign proving ground for a theory of politics constructed on other foundations. Its aspiration is to build theories of politics that are more attentive than others available to specifically historical processes of change and the political issues that those processes pose. It should be equally apparent that APD researchers want to know more than just “what happened” in the past; their aims characteristically go beyond getting the narrative of characters and events – the story – down on paper as accurately and meaningfully as possible. Taking care to get the facts right is important in this as in all forms of social science. APD’s primary interest, however, lies in grasping processes of change conceptually, in general terms, and in considering their broader implications for the polity as a whole.

One procedure to this end is comparison. Comparisons in APD research appear in many different forms, but alternative points of reference are seldom far from view: What happened at other times in American history? What happened at the same time in other parts of American government? What might have happened had things followed the path prescribed by some normative standard of politics? What happened at similar points in the history of other countries? The strong comparative bent of APD research, and its intellectual debt to comparative historical theory, stems in part from its interest in generalizing beyond a particular set of historical events and in part from an interest in counterfactuals broadly considered, that is, in analogous material that might help reveal how outcomes vary in relation to different historical circumstances.³ Why, for example, did

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the labor movement in America turn out the way it did rather than some other way?

There are limits to this interest in thinking about American politics as a branch of comparative political studies; the comparisons featured reflect APD's own particular purposes. For instance, 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. With or without the use of comparisons, APD's single-country focus avoids the side-stepping that sometimes accompanies cross-country data and seeks instead to grapple with political change as it occurs, or not, in a specific place, the United States. It examines the terms, conditions, and meanings of change as these might be understood for this polity. The experiences of other countries are, in this sense, part of the backdrop, helping to set the stage for the issues that APD puts front and center: How is this polity put together? What constitutes significant change within it? How does that occur? Does political change in America build to something new or merely reshuffle old forms? Is there a discernable direction to political change in America over time? Answers to these questions appear study by study, as scholars organize American political history into patterns, political regularities observed over time.

Pattern identification is the sine qua non of the enterprise.⁴ Without patterns – representatives get reelected, wars build states, electoral realignments occur about every thirty years, African Americans vote Democratic – American political history would be just “one damn thing after another,” a relentless succession of events impervious to any larger meaning; sorting through and making sense of the innumerable details that attend every political situation would be difficult, perhaps impossible. Discovering patterns helps to locate the key components of a situation and demarcating them helps to identify meaningful points of change – before as opposed to after Congress reorganized itself; at the start as opposed to the end of the

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war; before the civil rights movement as opposed to after the mobilization of African Americans into politics. Political history, as we come to analyze and understand it, is always an arrangement of time into patterns.

APD research is not alone in the search for patterns; pattern identification is one of the most common of all research techniques. The basic procedure, the same everywhere, may even be said to subsume comparisons of the sort described earlier in which politics in, for example, France, Great Britain, and the United States, is treated essentially as different sets of patterns. As applied generally, the technique is first to classify historical material according to certain general characteristics and the circumstances of their occurrence and then to employ this classification in the analysis of material drawn from other times or places to determine the presence or absence of these same general characteristics and circumstances. The pattern, the regular appearance of a particular set of political characteristics across time or space, opens to explanation or to being discarded as uninteresting coincidence.

Though the technique is widely used, there is considerable variation in the kinds of patterns featured in different fields of research, and here again, particular uses tell a lot about the purposes of these fields themselves. Without pressing the point too hard, it is perhaps fair to say that historians characteristically stick closer to chronology in their search for patterns than do APD researchers, especially contemporary APD researchers. Moreover, when they address large-scale patterns, historians are apt to bundle contiguous years into bounded “eras” and to identify consistencies across institutional and cultural settings in ways that serve to synthesize politics within a period of time – the “age” of Federalism, the “age” of Jackson, the “party period,” the Cold War era. Even when historians identify patterns that recur over broad stretches of time – for instance, the republican ideology of the Founding era as it reappears in subsequent decades – it is the repetition within bounded periods rather than the mechanisms that move politics from one period to the next that holds sway.

APD research is, in contrast, characteristically more aggressive in its manipulation of patterns and more radical in its departure from

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a chronological view of history. The patterns it brings to light are as likely to overlap one another in an irregular fashion as to neatly align within a period, and the patterns of interest often range across broad swaths of time. These might be patterns of the present that extend all the way back to the origins of the Republic and before – like religious “awakening” – or patterns of the past, which, though seeming to fall away, leave traces that affect the operation of the new ones set in motion – like royal prerogative. Illuminating patterns of this sort, APD research indicates political movement *through* time rather than a polity bounded in time and highlights connections *between* politics in the past and politics in the present rather than the separateness and foreignness of past politics.⁵

By looking at what APD scholars do, we begin to see a bit more clearly what they are after. By giving their own twist to standard tools of comparison and pattern identification, they are better able to discern the separate elements that comprise the American polity, to see how these are arrayed and configured in time, and to examine how and with what effect the array changes over time. Their purposes are not entirely coincident with those of others who use one or both of these same techniques, with those of, for instance, historians, comparative theorists, or Americanists working in other precincts of political science. Nonetheless, their use of comparison and pattern identification emphasizes essential aspects of politics and political change neglected elsewhere.

Continuity and Change

Thinking about patterns in APD research immediately presents a paradox. Though centrally concerned with political change and its significance, the patterns scrutinized with greatest frequency in the APD literature – arguably the most important in lending APD coherence as a “field” – are patterns of constancy, displaying little or no apparent change over time. These are features of American politics that appear to be the most resilient, that seem to have remained the same in certain essential characteristics over the better part of two centuries. The Constitution, with its foundational structure of

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federalism, separated powers, and fixed and staggered elections, is the subject of one such claim of no-change; the failure of radical ideologies, in particular of socialist movements, to take hold in the United States is another; the two-party system is a third; sectional divisions in the political economy a fourth. These constants present the master problematic of APD research: how to calibrate the significance of change amid so much apparent continuity in the fundamentals?

Though prominently featured, these continuities are not taken at face value in APD research; on the contrary, scholars characteristically put them up against other patterns that circumscribe, modify, or otherwise impinge on their fixed status. Cyclical patterns produce one sort of modification, for example, new party coalitions form every thirty years, with each new formation significantly altering the meaning and effect of constitutional relationships.⁶ Other changes, related to patterns, are imprinting events, breakpoints in time, that alter aspects of politics decisively from before and with far-reaching consequences for operations elsewhere later down the road: the revolt against Speaker of the House Joseph Cannon in 1910 marked a sea change in the internal operations of the Congress and eventually made itself felt on institutional relationships throughout the government.⁷ Another pattern appears in the breach, in some defining void, which operates as a “boundary condition” of politics in this polity: the absence of full-blown feudalism in America’s past circumscribed its politics long into the future, wedding it seemingly forever to a liberal ideology.⁸ And there are relationships formed by the sequencing of patterns: the franchise in the United States was extended widely prior to the development of central administrative controls; like a boundary condition, this sequence influences rather than signals change or no-change.⁹

Cycles and other recurrent patterns found in American political history are of special interest in assessing relations of continuity and change because they suggest that breakpoints themselves sometimes take the form of patterned events. Recent observations of recurrence in the APD literature include recurrent moments of constitutional reconstruction,¹⁰ recurrent modes of presidential leadership,¹¹ recurrent cultural outbursts contributing to the secular growth of