

The Search for American Political Development

The Search for American Political Development is the first full-scale assessment of American political development (“APD”) as a field of inquiry in political science. The book surveys its foundations in the origins of the discipline, evaluates the current state of its institutional and cultural investigations, and addresses the challenges APD scholars confront today. The authors seek to move the enterprise forward with chapters devoted to the concept of political development and to its methodological and substantive implications for the study of politics.

Karen Orren and Stephen Skowronek are founders and managing editors of *Studies in American Political Development*. Karen Orren is Professor of Political Science at the University of California, Los Angeles. Stephen Skowronek is the Pelatiah Perit Professor of Political and Social Science at Yale University.

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*For J. David Greenstone, in memory, and Theodore J. Lowi,
teachers of us both*

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Preface

This book is the product of a long, sometimes exasperating, sometimes exhilarating collaboration. Certain values helped us through, chief among these the value of friendship. We began more than twenty years ago when casual conversations about politics and history led us to create a journal outlet for scholars with similar interests, *Studies in American Political Development*. Among the benefits of editorship has been regular contact with a wide range of perspectives and participation, however vicariously, in each. In this way, our collaboration has included the unwitting persons whose names are found on *Studies*' tables of contents.

That said, we are inclined to add something more than a routine statement absolving others of responsibility for what we have written here. While in editing the journal we seek to present historical research by political scientists in all its variety, in writing this book we set out to craft a statement of our own. The title of the book is meant to capture the dual nature of "the search" for American political development as we see it today: in part, it is an effort to bring a story – the story of America's political development – into sharper relief; in part, it is an effort to bring into sharper relief an academic subfield, "APD," within the discipline of political science. How this subfield defines itself will have a lot to do with how it tells the story, and the time seems ripe for a considered treatment.

Our aim throughout has been to describe the distinctive set of interests that drives research on American political development, to do so in a way that is true to what scholars associated with this field actually write, and to convey to others – students with a general interest in politics, scholars working in other subfields, prospective

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APD recruits – why we think these interests are worthy of sustained attention. It was apparent to us at the start, however, that merely surveying the different avenues of research currently explored by historically oriented political scientists in order to reach for some elusive consensus among them would not do much to distinguish, much less advance, the common enterprise. In our review of the literature, we will explain what we see as the current uncertainty about APD's nature and scope, but to do this and no more, did not seem sufficiently helpful either. Doing more, in turn, made our task more complicated and inevitably more controversial.

To clarify our own thinking, we decided that the best course was to let the subject be our guide. Rather than try to fit issues posed by the study of American political development to the recent trends and received canons of research in other precincts of political science and of history, we decided to work the other way around. We asked ourselves two basic questions: What does a historical analysis of American politics entail, and what, exactly, is political development? Proceeding along these lines promised a way to uncover the contributions that a field with this name might make to the understanding of both politics and history, and also a way to assess those elements of research design that distinguish this literature from that of related undertakings.

We argue that APD is best understood neither as the political history of the United States nor as the use of history as a source of data for testing theories of politics based on non-historical assumptions. Our contention is that APD is worthy of consideration as a field of inquiry because it harbors an approach to political analysis all its own: it grapples with what we describe as the historical construction of politics, and with political arrangements of different origins in time operating together. It will be seen that the analytic stance is different from that generated by other research programs in the study of American politics, even when the subject matter of that research is historical, and also from that afforded by earlier studies of political development. The template we provide takes account of the unraveling of teleological assumptions about development found in those earlier studies, while, at the same time, allowing us to retrieve

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“development” as a signal attribute of politics, one that holds out a wide-ranging agenda for substantive research and theory building.

Just as essential as a template for historical analysis is a clear definition of the concept of political development itself. By reclaiming this concept for the study of American politics we are, in a sense, defining the dependent variable, describing in general terms what APD as a field of inquiry ultimately needs to explain. Readers will find that our definition is heavily weighted toward political institutions, for we locate political development in the reconstruction of authority relations in governance. A definition that references authority, in both its formal aspects and practical operations, provides a reliable empirical indicator of political development without closing off further debate about what factors might explain development as it occurs. We do not expect our definition of development to settle anything once and for all, but we do think that by spotlighting the substance and accumulation over time of changes in governing arrangements, our definition puts politics at the center of developmental analysis and situates political action at its most consequential.

What follows, then, are the results of our search as it has proceeded to date. Readers familiar with our previous writings may recognize some of the themes in this book. Reworking them in the context of questions currently confronting the subfield as a whole has altered our thinking and deepened our appreciation for the issues that surround the historical study of politics. In the final analysis, this is our bid to revive a venerable conversation about the development of the American polity, to reexamine traditional themes and rework them into a timely research program. We intend it as a guide, one of many ways into our subject, and as such, the conclusions we draw speak for us alone.

To those who have read and criticized various versions of these arguments in working papers, discarded chapters, and full manuscript drafts we are especially grateful. They include: Bruce Ackerman, Richard Bensel, Terri Bimes, Walter Dean Burnham, Daniel Carpenter, John Coleman, Steven Dunn, David Ericson, Morris Fiorina, Daniel Galvin, Matthew Green, Jacob Hacker, Marc Janssen, Victoria Hattam, Ira Katznelson, Rogan Kersh, David Mayhew,

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