

REVIEW ESSAY

Compared to what?: Setting American political development in comparative context

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Abstract

The recent crisis of democracy in the United States and around the world has highlighted the value of both historical and comparative analysis and brought the subfields of American political development and comparative politics into frequent conversation with each other. In fact, these subfields emerged from common origins and draw on similar conceptual and methodological tools. This essay identifies the historical and intellectual connections between the two fields and suggests the emerging possibilities of bringing the cross-national study of political development onto a common platform. It then draws out some themes that emerge from this pathway and considers how these themes might point the way toward a more systematic enterprise that can help illuminate some of the most pressing challenges of a turbulent political era.

Keywords: American political development; comparative politics; the state; democracy

The recent convulsions of American democracy have prompted much soul-searching among scholars of American politics. Over several decades, American politics has been dramatically transformed, from a system characterized largely by negotiation, compromise, and moderation to one that features increasingly direct, intense, and sometimes violent conflict between political leaders and among citizens (Kalmoe and Mason 2022). By the 2016 election, even long-established democratic norms – such as the legitimacy of elections and the freedom of the press – began to seem fragile. These circumstances raise critical questions that contemporary observers of American politics have rarely, if ever, had to face: can we continue to presume that the United States is a stable democratic regime? Is American democracy seriously at risk? Many scholars of American politics have felt ill-equipped to grapple with these questions using their own subfield's existing analytical frameworks (Lieberman and Mettler *forthcoming*). Some of the more successful attempts to grapple with these startling developments have plumbed American history to help understand how the forces that threaten democracy have

worked over time to create repeated crises of governance in the United States (Callen and Rocco 2020; Mettler and Lieberman 2020; Tarrow 2021). The analytical tools that characterize the subfield of American political development – the importance of history, the centrality of political institutions and the state, the focus on temporally and contextually situated causality – seem essential to meet the demands of the moment (Orren and Skowronek 2004; Mettler and Valelly 2016).

At the same time, these developments have exposed the ways in which in the politics of the United States is susceptible to the same forces that shape politics elsewhere. This may not seem like a surprising observation, but the study of American politics has long been a somewhat self-enclosed enterprise; with some notable exceptions, few Americanists have seriously entertained the proposition that we should consider the United States as a *democratizing* nation, rather than one that had already become democratic (Valelly 2004; King et al. 2009; Mickey 2015). Yet the apparent fragility of American democracy surrounding the Trump presidency sent observers of American politics looking for comparative referents to explain a crisis that seemed to be following a pattern that had unfolded along similar lines elsewhere: in Hungary, Turkey, Russia, and Venezuela, among others (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Lieberman et al. 2019; Roberts 2019). In light of recent events, then, it makes sense that the influence of comparative politics on the study of American politics is on the rise.

At the same time, this influence also seems to be running in reverse. In a fascinating and perceptive survey of recent trends in political science, Jack Lucas and Robert Vipond (2017) note that many of the themes that characterize the American political development (APD) as a distinct mode of inquiry are also important in the study of Canadian politics, although they suggest that Canadian political scientists have not fully embraced or exploited the explanatory possibilities of this approach. They call for a self-conscious movement toward a “Canadian political development” approach that might draw on the APD repertoire and apply APD’s varied and ever-expanding analytical toolkit to problems in the evolution of Canadian political institutions, practices, and behavior. Much the same argument could easily pertain to the study of the politics of other nations as well. Extending Lucas and Vipond’s observations about the potential utility of APD for Canadian politics, their call for cross-fertilization does not go far enough toward a truly *comparative* approach to political development.

One overarching theme that emerges from the juxtaposition of multiple national developmental traditions is the value – I would even go so far as to say the *necessity* – of comparison for the study of political development, and particularly its value for studying *American* political development, even though the study of American politics is typically a separate enterprise in political science, at least in the United States. The historical and comparative stance that has surfaced in response to the global crisis of democracy in recent years – and particularly its American variant – should provoke a query about the more general properties and usefulness of this approach. Both comparative and historical analysis offer rigorous analytical frameworks that can help us understand vexing and troublesome political developments that otherwise seem to defy classification and analysis. The study of American politics in political science has long been dominated by approaches that focus exclusively on the United States and largely on contemporary politics in

ways that tend to ratify and reinforce the subfield's exceptionalist presumptions and to limit its analytical vocabulary when confronted with developments – such as the installation of a president with manifestly authoritarian aspirations or an armed insurrection that interrupted a centuries-long run of peaceful transfers of power – that fall outside the scope of what has come to be considered “normal” democratic politics.

In particular, the move toward comparative and historical analyses of American politics offers a set of clear advantages for understanding important patterns of activity in American politics, from the cataclysmic to the mundane. First, this approach can help navigate the tension between what we might call “lumping” and “splitting”: the social scientific imperative to discover general patterns of politics, on the one hand, and more specific national or historical observations that often seem to deviate from more general models, on the other. Second, work in this vein frequently aims to connect and balance two social scientific tendencies that often seem to be at cross purposes with each other: detailed description and model building. Finally, it can simultaneously elucidate patterns of both stability and change over time. The productive tensions along each of these dimensions frame a set of challenges and choices for scholars working in this mode, and this approach can begin to define a distinctive space for a comparative and historical approach to American politics characterized by both empirical discovery and conceptual innovation; in fact, the refusal to choose between these two paths (and even a dialectical relationship between them) is a signal virtue of a comparative-historical merger.

In the remainder of this essay, I describe the affinities between the subfields of comparative politics and American political development, which emerged from common intellectual and disciplinary origins, and elaborate on some of these common characteristics. I then review some recent works that illustrate this approach to demonstrate both its promise and some of its challenges and draw some conclusions about the specific methodological opportunities that a joint comparative-American political development (CAPD) approach offers, as well as some of the challenges it poses. I conclude with some observations about the promise of a CAPD approach, particularly for approaching important system-level questions about American politics that tend to confound more conventional approaches.

A dual legacy: The comparative roots of American political development

Although the subfield of American politics remains possibly the last respectable bastion of area studies in the social sciences, it is useful to recall that the study of APD is inherently comparative. APD has its roots in observations and questions about a set of comparatively distinctive characteristics of American politics (Stepan and Linz 2011; Miller 2023): its core electoral and governing institutions (separated powers, federalism, and other features of the constitutional system), patterns of political contestation (such as political parties and the party system), and public policies (the welfare state, for example). Consequently, the inferences that APD scholarship draws tend to follow a comparative logic. Comparative queries about (and,

in many cases, critiques of) American politics have longstanding provenance in the discipline. Woodrow Wilson (1885), for example, derived his advocacy of a parliamentary system from a contrast between the American separation of powers and the British Westminster system, in which the executive and legislative branches were essentially fused into a vigorous and powerful government. In the middle of the twentieth century, the American Political Science Association's (1950) brief for more programmatically distinct and electorally responsible parties similarly drew on the contrast between the diffuse American catch-all parties of the era and the more ideologically cohesive and purposeful parties of European democracies. Finally, it is important to note that the field of American political development extends beyond the discipline of political science; many of its foundational thinkers and current practitioners are political and historical sociologists (along with some fellow-traveling historians), and its animating concerns arose out of the broad overlap between political science and sociology in the late twentieth century.

Beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, the comparative nature of these questions about American governance and society became more explicit and more pointed. Students of the welfare state began to ask why American social provision policies seemed less generous and comprehensive than European welfare states (Flora and Heidenheimer 1981; Myles 1984; see also Weir et al. 1988). Scholars of the state, a concept with a distinctly Old-World genealogy, began to extend their conceptual maps to the New World, if only to single out the United States as a comparative anomaly. The earliest of these accounts saw the American state as a curiosity in comparative terms – an underdeveloped “Tudor state” that lacked the coercive capacity to maintain order in a modernizing society, as Samuel Huntington (1968) argued in the 1960s, and thus a fundamental deviation from the core European model centered around the progressive democratization of absolutism (Moore 1966; Shefter 1977; Mann 1993). In this context, J. P. Nettl (1968: 561), perhaps the most perceptive early champion of the modern study of the state, could write confidently in 1968 that “an American sociopolitical self-examination simply leaves no room for any valid notion of the state.”

The rising concern with the state, in turn, was part of a broader reaction to the twin dominant midcentury pillars of the discipline: pluralism and modernization theory. The pluralism that came to dominate American political science in the decades after World War II understood politics primarily in terms of groups that were engaged in a contest for power and resources through electoral competition, legislative bargaining, and mutual accommodation. A central tenet of pluralism was that the resources that conferred political power were widely distributed and that no single group was likely to dominate (Truman 1951; Dahl 1961). The reaction to pluralism took several paths, focusing variously on the self-interested individual incentives that inhibited group formation (Olson 1965), the upper-class bias of mobilization patterns (Schattschneider 1960; Lindblom 1977), and its tendency to treat the state as a mere neutral arbiter of political contestation rather than a set of institutions that themselves shape and channel political power (Bachrach and Baratz 1962; Lowi 1969; but see Katznelson 2003). Collectively, these turns in the discipline gave rise to a several variants of a “new institutionalism,” all of which came to understand individuals and groups alike as embedded in systems of rules, organizations, and cultural patterns that shape and constrain the ways in which

people understand their place in a society and a political system; conceive and articulate beliefs, preferences, and goals; and act – whether individually or collectively – to pursue those ends and seek legitimacy.

The “new institutionalism” was a heterogeneous domain that displayed substantial (and often disputatious) conceptual and methodological pluralism, ranging across mathematically formal microeconomic modeling, game theory and strategic behavior, sociological investigations of culture and organizations, and deep historical inquiry (March and Olsen 1984; Powell and DiMaggio 1991; Steinmo et al. 1992; Hall and Taylor 1996; Immergut 1998; Fioretos et al. 2016). Nevertheless, all of the “new institutionalist” streams bore a strong family resemblance that betrayed their common origin, namely a commitment to theoretical rigor and systematic inference and an orientation toward exposing and understanding patterns of structured regularity in political life and exploring their consequences for political behavior and outcomes. An emerging rapprochement among institutional approaches in the 1990s and 2000s came to recognize and exploit these commonalities (Lichbach and Zuckerman 1997; Bates et al. 1998; Lieberman 2002; Katznelson and Weingast 2005; Jenkins 2016).

At the same time, scholars were reacting to modernization theory, which was the dominant paradigm in the emerging field of comparative politics. In broad terms, modernization theory posited a tight connection between economic and political development and predicted that industrialization and economic growth would impel “traditional” societies toward more “modern” forms of authority and, ultimately, toward democracy. Variants of the modernization approach to national development stressed different patterns of economic, social, and cultural change in countries around the world, focusing on factors such as industrialization, middle-class formation, urbanization, technological innovation and diffusion, literacy, and mass media (Lipset 1959; Rostow 1960; Apter 1965). Challenges to modernization theory began to emphasize the role of class politics in shaping the pathways of national political development. This emerging neo-Marxist synthesis tended to understand the state as an instrument of class power (Moore 1966; Miliband 1969; Poulantzas 1973; Anderson 1974; Block 1977). Atop this Marxian critique, Charles Tilly (1975), Alfred Stepan (1978), and Theda Skocpol (1979), among others, added a Weberian overlay, pursuing the notion that social structures and political processes derive not only from economic factors but also from patterns of social organization that are independent of class and introducing the state as a potentially autonomous political factor in national development (Evans et al. 1985).

It was also Skocpol and Stephen Skowronek who turned the emerging lens of the state toward American politics in the 1970s and 1980s. While it was clearly situated in these intellectual currents, Skowronek’s innovative and field-defining *Building a New American State* (1982) broke with the conventional comparative understanding of a “stateless” United States and instead described neither an absent nor a stunted American state but rather a different kind of state, rooted not in a centralized, coercive bureaucracy but in a dispersed system of party organization and legal process – his now-famous nineteenth-century “state of courts and parties” – that shaped Progressive-Era attempts at reform and reorganization (see also Carpenter 2003; Mettler and Valelly 2016). While Skowronek’s work has become a critical touchstone for scholars of American politics, it is worth recalling that Part

I of *Building a New American State* is deeply steeped in both theoretical and comparative observations about political development and the apparently anomalous American state, ranging widely from Tocqueville, Hegel, and Marx in the nineteenth century to Huntington, Tilly, Skocpol, and Nettl in the twentieth.

Skocpol (1979, 1992), too, applied her revisionist approach to the state, honed in her monumental comparative study of revolutions, to the United States, focusing particular on the evolution of the American welfare state. Building on Skowronek's innovative approach as well as her own intellectual roots in comparative historical sociology, Skocpol developed a compelling account of American state formation that focused further on the distinctive features of the American political system – powerful courts and distributed, patronage-based political parties but also federalism and the federated structure of American civil-society organizations – rather than the *absence* of the factors commonly adduced to account for European welfare states, such as the strength of labor organization, the rise of social democratic political parties, and parliamentary or corporatist government (Wilensky 1975; Esping-Andersen 1990). Skocpol along with several her students and colleagues developed and extended her state-centered (or polity-centered, as she came to call it) approach to consider other dimensions of American institutional development and state formation, further exploring important dimensions of American political life including race, gender, civic engagement, and social movements (see, among others, Clemens 1997; Lieberman 1998; Mettler 1998; Skocpol 2003; Amenta 2007).

Comparative advantages and challenges

I rehearse this genealogy not simply to pay homage to a particular group of intellectual forebears but rather to call new attention to the close family connections between American political development and comparative politics and to highlight the methodological opportunities that emerge from the effort to reconnect the APD and comparative politics traditions (see Zelizer 2003; Orren and Skowronek 2004; Mettler and Valelly 2016). Kimberly Morgan (2016) has similarly shown how the two fields have diverged, and she rightly insists on the enduring affinity between them and argues that the divergence has come at a cost for both sides because it limits investigators' conceptual horizons, leading often to narrow findings, misleading conclusions, or outright errors.

Importantly, as Morgan notes, there are several areas where incorporating the United States into historically aware comparisons has yielded important and often surprising results that enrich both US and comparative perspectives. The welfare state is clearly one such area where comparatively inflected observations have shed important light on both distinctive features of American social provision (Skocpol 1992; Howard 1997; Lieberman 1998; Mettler 1998, 2011; Hacker 2002) and on patterns of social policy in other countries (Pierson 1994; Morgan 2006). Race and ethnicity – long an area of apparent American distinctiveness – is also increasingly the subject of comparative inquiry that has illuminated patterns of race making and, inequality, and incorporation in a variety of national settings (Marx 1998; Lieberman 2005; Thompson 2016; Hanchard 2018). Similarly, policy studies in a wide range of areas have been informed by a comparative perspective that frames

questions about American particularities set against patterns in other countries (Steinmo and Watts 1995; Sheingate 2001; Oberlander 2003; Thelen 2004; Quadagno 2005; Gottschalk 2006; Prasad 2006; Jacobs and King 2016). And Jack Lucas (2017) similarly makes the case that many of the tools of APD – regarding patterns of political order, the dynamics of political change, and the nature of the state—are both applicable to the study of urban politics and governance and portable outside the United States (see also Dilworth 2009).

Historically minded observers have also generally been more attuned than most American politics scholars to the incompleteness and fragility of American democracy over the course of history and to the constraints on citizenship and full inclusion that have long been constitutive of American politics (Mettler 1998; Valelly 2004; King et al. 2009; Mickey 2015; Bateman 2018; Lepore 2018; Pierson and Schickler 2022; Richardson 2023). In recent years, more pointed comparative analyses have helped to define, and even begin to answer, a set of critical questions about democratic fragility in the United States. Are the forces that threaten American democracy indigenous, homegrown, unique to the United States? Do they stem from defects in our own constitutional order, as some have suggested, or from the dangerous leadership of a single dangerous individual, as many believe (Dahl 2002; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2023)? Or do they reflect a broader cross-national phenomenon of right-wing authoritarian populism and democratic backsliding to which the United States is not uniquely susceptible (Weyland and Madrid 2019; McCoy and Somer 2022; Mudde 2022)? More generally, comparative-historical analyses have been able to consider ways in which American political development is systematically subject to the same forces that have long bedeviled other democratic systems (Lieberman et al. 2019; Kaufman and Haggard 2019; Mettler and Lieberman 2020).

Many, if not most, works in the APD tradition come down to arguments about specific national configurations of political institutions, ideas, or culture; even if they generally leave unspoken the counterfactual speculation that if the prevailing institutions (or ideas or cultural formations) were different, the outcomes would have been different as well (Miller 2023), the underlying logic of inference they often follow is at least implicitly comparative. A lot of explaining can be accomplished by exploiting variations across time, place, and context within American history (and indeed the entire subfield of American politics survives and, to some degree, thrives on the basis of this approach), and scholars of American politics have long traded off breadth for depth (with varying degrees of self-awareness about the implications of this choice and the limitations of the dominance of quantitative approaches in the subfield). But as with other examples of area studies, geographical boundaries impose limits on both descriptive and causal inference. Many scholars of American politics look to solve these problems of inference using experimental or quasi-experimental research designs and quantitative analytical techniques that allow precise identification of causal relationships among variables (Pierson 2007). Practitioners of the emerging field of historical political economy are beginning to apply these tools to historical questions, both in the United States and comparatively (Jenkins and Rubin 2024). But these approaches still pose rather stiff challenges for scholars of American political development, who generally seek to explain significant outcomes in American political history, working backwards to uncover

the factors that might be responsible for those outcomes (rather than starting with causes and looking for their effects) (Galvin 2020). Nevertheless, APD practitioners are generally concerned with uncovering causal relationships in ways that go beyond merely using historical data or methods or attempting to reconstruct past events persuasively as is often the case among political historians (John 2016; McConaughy 2020).

These constraints pose a special challenge for scholars of American political development, in which the key explanatory factors behind an outcome of interest are often pitched at the level of system- or national-level regime characteristics. Here is where APD's single-country focus becomes a potential hindrance to inference; if it cannot articulate what is distinctive about a political phenomenon and how it differs from other varieties of the same phenomenon elsewhere, what hope is there of observing it clearly, measuring it precisely, or explaining it convincingly? Alfred Stepan and Juan Linz (2011: 853) note the comparative distinctiveness of inequality in the United States and call vigorously for "more politically focused, comparative research" that incorporates the United States and probes the connections between entrenched and increasingly dysfunctional political institutions and longstanding political inequality. Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (2023) similarly identify the multiple ways in which American political institutions empower minorities as a key ingredient of American democratic dysfunction (see also Stepan's (1999) depiction of American institutions as "demos-constraining").

It is worth noting as well that works in this register have often made methodological and theoretical as well as substantive contributions on a range of important topics: mechanisms of institutional and political change, for example (Lieberman 2002; Hacker 2004; Streeck and Thelen 2005; Mahoney and Thelen 2010) and the role of ideas and interest formation in political life and policymaking (Berman 1998; Smith 2006; Béland and Cox 2011). It seems more likely than not that this innovative streak is not accidental but rather reflects the very real conceptual possibilities inherent in this mode of scholarship, which by its nature directs researchers to unusual and out-of-the-way evidence and often requires novel frameworks in order to make sense of the data (see Rustow 1970).

Compared to what? The scope of comparative-American political development

Increasingly, scholars of national political development – American and otherwise – are looking beyond their "own" national borders, in ways that I want to suggest amount to a coherent project. These works pointedly demonstrate the value of setting studies of American political development side by side with other national cases. This approach often works best among sets of national cases that share a set of common system-level characteristics. Comparisons among the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada, for example, have proven especially fruitful. These countries, of course, shares several critical affinities that make them especially susceptible to close comparison: close commonalities of history (in particular a shared experience of empire and colonialism), law, language, culture, and more. This kind of grouping poses both opportunities and limitations. On the opportunity

side, it tends to highlight critical patterns of similarity and difference between countries, as well as within countries and over time, across a group of largely similar cases (following the broadest outlines of John Stuart Mill's method of difference), enabling finely calibrated comparative design and persuasive inference. A number of comparative works have very effectively exploited comparisons between the United States and both the UK and Canada (see, for example, Pierson 1994; King 1995, 1999; Lipset 1990; Kaufman 2009).

At the same time, narrow comparisons along these lines tend to limit the potential scope of investigation and the generalizability of comparative conclusions. Other carefully drawn comparisons might prove productive for causal explanation and theory building. Widening the angle a bit, some works compare the United States to other countries with large industrial economies that engaged in democratization struggles of one kind or another in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This perspective usually pulls comparative analysts toward western and northern Europe, although recent work on state building and political development in Latin America has suggested there are more parallels within the Western Hemisphere than most observers have considered (Mazzuca 2021; Mazzuca and Sheingate 2023). Expanding the geographical reach of the comparative-APD enterprise again highlights its reciprocal possibilities for understanding pathways and outcomes of political development both in the United States and elsewhere (Casas 2023).

Even relaxing the constraint of Anglo-American similarities, these countries are commonly understood to share certain common background conditions of history and political economy. Works in this vein include Sven Steinmo (1993) on tax policy (the US, the UK, and Sweden); Christian Joppke (1999) on immigration (the US, Germany, and the UK); Adam Sheingate (2001) on farm policy and interest group power (the US, France, and Japan); Kathleen Thelen (2004) on labor and vocational training (the US, Germany, the UK, and Japan); and Robert Lieberman (2005) on race policy (the US, the UK, and France). Ranging further afield, some works move beyond even the constraints of what we might call industrial Christendom. In Anthony Marx's (1998) hands, the comparison of the United States, Brazil, and South Africa led to illuminating conclusions about the mutual constitution of race-making and state-building. And Dankwart Rustow's (1970) pathbreaking paper on democratization, for example drew on an entirely unexpected juxtaposition of Sweden and Turkey. More broadly, this approach shares an affinity with what Tulia Falletti and James Mahoney (2015) have called the comparative sequential method, which entails the rigorous comparison of sequences and temporally ordered processes as central objects of comparative analysis.

This kind of tight comparison of national cases can generate very revealing (and often surprising) observations and inferences and about individual cases, even ones that the most accomplished and knowledgeable of national scholars think they know well. In particular, subjecting American political development to this kind of comparatively informed analysis can expose hitherto underappreciated or misunderstood phenomena in ways that puncture the self-fulfilling presumptions of American exceptionalism (see Katznelson 1981; Lieberman 2001; Baldwin 2009). For example, the unexpected juxtaposition of Latin American and the United States has illuminated the critical role of subnational authoritarianism has played in the

tortured path of American democratic development (Gibson 2012; Mickey 2015). Similarly, comparative analyses drawn from Hungary (Mudde 2022), Latin America (Roberts 2019), and Southeast Asia (Slater 2022) have revealed how American democracy has been subject to forces of populism, centrifugal partisan alignments, and destabilizing democratic careening. Finally, it is worth noting that this comparative approach tends to focus on national units (such as nation-states) as distinct and analytically independent political formations (although some works do consider transnational influences on national politics [Rodgers 1998; Katznelson and Shefter 2002; Thompson 2016]), and it thus cuts somewhat against the grain of recent approaches to global politics that emphasize connections across borders and overlapping sources of order, sovereignty, and contention throughout world history (Bhambra 2014; Zarakol 2022).

The possibilities of comparative-American political development

A new generation of scholarship in this mold confirms and, if anything, deepens the affinity between APD and comparative politics and demonstrates precisely some of the strengths (as well as some of the limitations) of bringing APD and comparative politics into close conversation. This new generation of work builds on APD's considerable legacy of historical work blended with sophisticated methods of data collection, analysis, and inference that would have been inconceivable in the subfield's early years. As a unified endeavor, a CAPD amalgam makes two key moves that can usefully structure the enterprise. First, it makes more explicit the comparative logic of inference that implicitly motivates a lot of American political development research (along with other single-country developmental studies). Second, it engages the relatively well-developed analytical tools and categories of APD to draw out more systematic inferences about political processes that unfold over time.

A survey of some recent work of this type maps nicely onto a set of organizing themes that define the possibilities of the construct and the structure of an emerging field: first, the connection between general patterns of politics and more nationally specific observations – what we might describe as the paradoxically complementary tendencies toward “lumping” and “splitting” as approaches to social scientific inquiry; second, the connection between detailed description, on the one hand, and simplification and model building on the other; third, the simultaneous elucidation of patterns of stability and change over time; and finally, the range of substantive foci, from general features of political institutions and behavior to the specificity of critical political episodes or complex issues of public policy. The tensions along each of these dimensions frame a set of challenges and choices for scholars working in these areas, and collectively the approaches represented in this collection begin to define a distinctive space for an integrated approach to comparative and American political development.

Lumpers and splitters

This kind of work in comparative political development tends to spread out along the spectrum that runs between “lumpers” (those who tend toward broad

classifications of political phenomena, emphasize similarities, and collect cases into categories) and “splitters” (those who lean toward differentiation and classify events and identify separate cases as specific and irreducible). Some authors use case-specific data to develop propositions about something that is presumed to be *general* about politics. In her important study of the political roots of the adoption of women’s suffrage in the United States, Britain, and France, for example, Dawn Teele (2018) presents the three cases as a means to substantiate a general argument about the political and strategic roots of suffrage expansion. Teele (2018: 6) summarizes her general case with admirable brevity: “Winning the vote depends on the alignment of interests between elected politicians and suffragists.” Mobilizing both extensive cross-national quantitative data and intricate studies of her three principal national cases, she shows how, in different national political and institutional contexts, suffragists forged strategic alliances with political parties who hoped to gain electoral advantage by supporting expanded voting rights. Similarly, Timothy Weaver (2016, 2021) uses a finely drawn account of the parallel emergence of a certain kind of market fundamentalism in the United States and the United Kingdom across apparent divides of party and ideology to advance a broad argument about the role of ideas in policymaking and to give welcome new conceptual shape to the overused and often sloppy concept of “neoliberalism.”

“Lumpers” in this vein need not necessarily explicitly invoke comparisons to illuminate the connection between specific cases and general phenomena. Devin Caughey (2018), for example, uses a fascinating and ingenious study of midcentury patterns of representation and responsiveness in the American South both to counter the prevailing impression of the pre-civil rights South as a thoroughly authoritarian subnational enclave and to advance a broader argument about the role of party systems and party organization in democratic politics and governance (see Key 1949; Mickey 2015). Jonathan Obert (2018) similarly weaves an account of American state building that emphasizes the distinctive coevolution of public and private forms of violence that resulted from the “decoupling” of institutional rules of authority from the network relations among the people who are subject to that authority. Among highly mobile nineteenth-century Americans, this process of decoupling gave rise to a familiar set of distinctively American quasi-public instruments of social order: the private detective, the posse, and the gunfighter. This is a distinctly American tale, but one set against a comparative background.

David Bateman (2018), by contrast, lies more toward the “splitter” end of the spectrum. He uses the comparative cases of Britain and France to punctuate and highlight what is fundamentally an argument about how and why the development of universal white male suffrage in the United States was accompanied systematically by the disenfranchisement of African Americans in the first half of the nineteenth century. His remarkable historical reconstruction of early suffrage debates demonstrates that this double movement, of expanding democracy for some while excluding others, was a critical element of American democratization, driven by the demands of partisan coalition-building and the search for a common national identity that produced a “white man’s republic.” Similar dynamics ensued in Britain and France later in the century with a range of outcomes: suffrage expansion through reform in Britain was accompanied by some electoral exclusion along class

and ethnic lines, targeted mostly against the Irish, while France managed to enact universal manhood suffrage in Third Republic.

The self-conscious juxtaposition of these essentially inward- and outward-looking studies in the CAPD framework is instructive. Nationally specific observations can provide ample fodder for more general hypotheses about political life that can be further developed, refined, and tested through comparison; comparative studies that advance more general propositions can spark new perspectives and observations about apparently settled points of national politics, which can then lead to new national approaches, which can provoke new theorizing in a comparative context, and so forth. The unsettledness of this perpetual cycle of empirical upheaval and conceptual innovation is a critical feature rather than a defect of the emergent comparative-APD approach. Collectively, works in this register can provoke important self-reflection among scholars of both American and comparative politics about levels of analysis, about the uses of specificity and generality in political analysis, and above all about the fit between a question or problem and the conceptual apparatus deployed to meet it. This kind of questioning is all to the good, and the kind of generative meso- or intermediate-level theoretical universe in which this approach should reside – focused neither on all encompassing social forces such as the economy nor on individual human interactions but generally on midrange political structures such as particular institutions, policies, or even the state – enables us generally to keep both the specific and the general in view. As Rustow (1970: 350) suggested in the earliest era of comparative politics, “the middle course avoids the twin dangers of scholasticism and of fact-grubbing” – between ethereally abstract theorizing and mere narration (see Lieberman 2008). Ultimately, one hopes that the distinction between inward- and outward-looking orientations would begin to collapse into a unified domain in which comparative and national research inform and reinforce each other.

Models and cases

Closely related to “lumping” and “splitting” is the tension between model-building and description (on this dilemma in comparative research, see King et al. 1994). At one pole is the willful simplification of the world and the reduction of complex empirical observations in order to build a model, a stylized approximation of reality designed to understand some particular feature of the world and elucidate causal relationships among its parts. This approach to social inquiry necessarily entails omitting details and flattening many of the contours of political systems and circumstances; in the extreme, as Adam Przeworski and Henry Teune (1970: 30) argued in an early elucidation of the comparative method, “the role of comparative research in the process of theory-building and theory-testing consists of replacing proper names of social systems by the relevant variables.” At the other pole is the rich, multilayered description of reality that is generally aimed at rendering the world accurately. In contrast to model-building, this approach offers close-range detail of specific events, places, times, and contexts but makes causal explanation difficult. As Rustow (1970: 349–50) pungently framed this choice, “any country study . . . sacrifices the advantages of comparison, the social scientist’s nearest substitute for a laboratory. No such study can tell us which strands in a tangle of

empirical factors represent the development of democracy and which the national idiosyncrasies of Monographistan.”

A critical common feature of works in the comparative-APD (CAPD) mode is the refusal to choose between these two extremes and the general focus on *descriptive* inference – “the process of understanding an unobserved phenomenon on the basis of a set of observations” (another sense in which CAPD operates at the meso-level theoretically) (King et al. 1994: 55). A range of work reflects this diversity of approach. Some deploy case material primarily to propound theory or test hypotheses. Ursula Hackett (2020), for example, develops an account of the rise of school vouchers in American public education as a means of developing an argument about what she calls “attenuated governance,” which has broader implications that extend beyond her case. Others are more interested in delving deeply into a particular case and less overtly concerned with the portability of their findings – Jeffery Jenkins and Justin Peck (2021) on post-Reconstruction congressional politics, for example. Here, too, the collective strength of the CAPD approach lies in this very diversity of approaches, and the creative tension between general explanations of broad political phenomena and a deeper, more narrow focus on proper names. At the very least, comparative-APD practitioners should be self-conscious about the weight we put on *both* halves of this formulation – “descriptive” (emphasizing deep knowledge of specific places, eras, or phenomena) as well as “inference” (oriented toward building models, developing and testing theory, and establishing causality) – and engage in a constant and vigilant dialogue between these two poles.

Stability and change

A third important concern of the CAPD approach – one that it shares with and borrows from APD – is the dual concern with stability and change. At one level, studies of national and comparative political development tend to be concerned with the origins and consequences of fixed, durable, and foundational structural characteristics of national political systems: constitutional features such as separated powers or parliamentary government, federalism or unitary governance. At another level, studies of political development are (more or less by definition) concerned with change over time in political attitudes and beliefs, behavior, policies, or institutional structure and operation. This tension between stability and change poses a particular explanatory challenge for studies of national political development: how to explain outcomes that vary over time when a key set of potential explanatory factors remains constant (King et al. 1994: 146–47). One of APD’s core questions from its earliest days has been how to identify and characterize real change and development in an institutional context where much remains stable – “durable shifts in governing authority,” in Karen Orren and Stephen Skowronek’s (2004: 123) memorable formulation.

Again, comparative-APD works look both ways and tackle the problem of defining institutional change from a variety of angles. In her important study of race, the census, and state-making in the United States, Canada, and Britain, for example, Debra Thompson (2016) develops an intricate theoretical framework that connects evolving transnational ideals about race, national institutional structures, and the changing nature of national censuses in all three countries. She weaves these

threads into an account of how both categories of racial classification and the state's efforts to make their populations racially legible developed over time. Weaver (2016) similarly shows how a common set of ideas about markets and their relationship to politics and policy took hold, in different national and local political contexts, and drove the parallel development of neoliberal urban policy in the United States and the United Kingdom. More generally, the collective power of the comparative-APD approach – especially the opportunity to study questions of stability, change, and political development in a comparative context – is that it allows (or even requires) us to ask hard questions about the durable, fixed features of national political systems; temporally or geographically specific *configurations* of institutions, governing arrangements, or patterns of political behavior that might be causally generative; and critical moments change and the processes that define them (Katznelson 1997; Collier and Collier 1991). The comparative frame of the construct should highlight these questions.

Finally, the comparative-APD approach is quite catholic in its capacity to engage a wide range of substantive issues and lends itself particularly to understanding key issues of public policy across the United States and numerous other countries in an especially theoretically informed way. To give a flavor of this range, just the works that I have briefly mentioned here cover a great deal of substantive territory: race and civil rights, urban economic development, education, policing, and voting rights and representation. The common focus on the origins, administration, and effectiveness of public policy again highlights CAPD's potential to deploy the comparative context and the juxtaposition of national cases and varying configurations of institutions, ideas, and cultural contexts to address critical social problems in multiple countries. Moreover, CAPD is also well positioned to trace the diffusion of policy ideas and instruments, both across and within national boundaries, and to improve policy solutions across the board.

Conclusion

The juxtaposition of American and other national paths of political development thus proves to be an exercise of enormous possibility. The CAPD enterprise inherits a substantial legacy of theoretical inventiveness and empirical depth. Starting particularly with a small set of historically similar countries, especially in Western Europe and the Anglo-American world, CAPD brings together the empirical richness and depth of distinct national literatures and scholarly traditions that often share a common conceptual apparatus and orientation and have much to learn from close contact. The affinities among these countries, in fact, offer the promise of the emergence of a potentially distinctive approach to both comparative analysis and the study of national political development. The low barriers to comparison among these countries (language, political tradition, closely connected academic communities) should encourage further interaction and collaboration. But these attributes can also point toward a useful template for the careful exploration of comparative political development even ranging further afield and should define a more general CAPD enterprise that can bring together the complementary analytical tools of American political development and comparative politics. And

the relatively easy availability of comparative referents for most political phenomena should encourage scholars to keep comparative possibilities in view, whether more or less explicitly. I am not suggesting that every piece of work in the CAPD mode needs to be explicitly comparative; rather, the comparative mindset and the impulse toward careful strategies of inference should always frame even single-country inquiries, in ways that neither self-enclosed national studies nor large-N statistical analyses can do as well.

Finally, the United States is in the midst of perhaps its gravest democratic crisis in a history rife with crises. Donald Trump's presidency and its ugly denouement, in particular, exposed and further stretched a frayed democratic fabric. The Trump era came at the confluence of several threats that we know from comparative studies of democratization are especially dangerous for the sustenance of democracy: extreme political polarization, growing racial conflict that is increasingly aligned with partisan division, high and rising income inequality, and executive aggrandizement (Mettler and Lieberman 2020). It remains unclear, however, whether Trump's presidency signals a fundamental shift in the structure or operation of American political institutions. On the one hand, as many have pointed out, the character and quality of American governance have been declining for some time. This is perhaps especially true of Congress, which seemed to have reached new depths of sclerosis and dysfunction well before Trump's ascendancy (Mann and Ornstein 2012; Binder 2015; but see also Mayhew 2017). But it might also be said of the policy apparatus, which is increasingly fraying and showing its age, and the bureaucracy, which has come to resemble an assemblage of ill-fitting parts that is constantly on the verge of breaking down (Teles 2013; Mettler 2016). At the same time, other observers might point out that American institutions have been strained and stretched before but have generally recalibrated themselves. At the same time, the contemporary era has focused attention on a set of questions about American politics that the subfield of American politics has not generally been equipped to ask. It is no accident, perhaps, that some of the most pointed and illuminating analyses of the contemporary predicament of the United States have come from comparativists, for whom the emergence, stability, and demise of democratic regimes are something of a stock-in-trade (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Roberts 2019; Carey et al. 2019).

As an essential hinge between American and comparative politics, American political development – and its CAPD extension – offers a promising approach to precisely these questions that require something of an Archimedean vantage point on the American regime (see Lieberman et al., 2019; Lieberman 2020). A comparative perspective, moreover, underscores the extent to which the Trump era is merely an American instance of a global wave of nationalist populism, pernicious polarization, and democratic decay, from which seemingly well-established European and other democracies are not immune (McCoy and Somer 2019). In this global context, the United States, along with other countries, has seen the activation and amplification of the kind of deep societal cleavages that have historically been seen as at most a subterranean feature of American politics, in contrast particularly to European and Latin American societies where societal cleavages have long structured, and often destabilized, national politics (Lipset and Rokkan 1967; Roberts 2022). Moreover, these cleavages increasingly overlap with partisan divisions, exacerbating polarization and potentially explosive political

antagonism and eroding the cross-cutting nature of American cleavages and catch-all parties that were long considered a bulwark against democratic breakdown in the United States (Linz 1990; Lee 2022). A CAPD perspective on these challenges exposes what long seemed like inherent stability and democratic expansion in the twentieth century as the product of an unusual confluence of historical circumstances under which American institutions temporarily defied comparative expectations about the centrifugal tendencies of presidential systems. If the CAPD framework can help to promote the aim of careful but forceful analysis of politics, policy, and possibilities in these troubling times, in the United States and elsewhere, it will be well on its way not only to an important place in the discipline but also to critical advances on some of the most pressing questions of our time.

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