

Our Future at Risk: Toward an American Political Development Scholarship of Foresight

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Research Article

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Abstract

For the first time since 1860, our collective future as an ideologically coherent and nominally democratic nation is at risk. In the short, medium, and long term, our nation faces several systemic and intertwined threats. Because these cascading crises threaten our fundamental political ideals and our lives, we recommend here a rapid and careful reorientation of at least some part of American political development (APD) toward a scholarship of foresight—that is, one based on the premise that anticipating and shaping the future is now as important as or more important than understanding the past. The article first considers some of the ways in which APD is tethered to the past and then discusses how several of the subfield's analytical approaches are compatible with a scholarship of foresight. Prognosis, prediction, and projection, we argue, are analytical tools that can inform prescription. We conclude with five sets of recommendations that can help APD scholars consider turning their attention toward the future.

It is not “Can any of us imagine better?” but “Can we all do better?” Object whatsoever is possible, still the question recurs, “Can we do better?” The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew.

—Abraham Lincoln, Second Annual Message, December 1, 1862

For the first time since 1860, our collective future as an ideologically coherent and nominally democratic nation is at risk. In the short term, our nation faces several systemic and intertwined threats: an organized movement to subvert and discredit our Constitution, intergenerational racialized harm and economic inequality severe enough to undermine fair representation, a political party targeting long-standing grants of rights to broad segments of the population, and a central state that lacks the full capacity and legitimacy to deal effectively with national exigencies such as a global pandemic. Internationally, in the medium term, we face widespread resource scarcity; the gradual erosion of public support for democratic institutions and norms across many western democracies; and now a serious and destabilizing war in Eastern Europe, disrupting energy and food supply chains worldwide. Globally, in the long run, the human-made climate change of the Anthropocene epoch threatens to cause the extinction of *Homo sapiens*. Many computer scientists believe that artificial intelligence will surpass human intelligence within this century and pose difficult control and fairness problems; and an increasingly disinformative, hateful, and exploitative cyber-capitalism captures more of our attention and resources.¹ What does this syndrome of challenges mean for American political development (APD)? Two years ago, the new editors of *Studies in American Political Development* (SAPD) noted that while “our strengths are historical and contextual . . . the subfield has always had an eye for the present and future.”² They have more recently called for reconsiderations of APD's orientation.

Because these overlapping crises threaten our lives and our ideals, we recommend here a rapid and careful reorientation of at least some part of APD toward a scholarship of foresight—one based on the premise that anticipating and shaping the future is now as important as or more important than understanding the past. Even if you are inclined to disagree with this premise and do not find our present so stormy that we must think anew of APD's goals, we believe this article may still be of use, as we offer a framework that may help clarify your response to this moment.³ A scholar's current stance toward their work, we argue, must follow

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¹Stuart Russell, *Human Compatible: Artificial Intelligence and the Problem of Control* (New York: Viking, 2019).

²Paul Frymer, Marie Gottschalk, and Kimberly Johnson, “Mission Statement,” *Studies in American Political Development* 34 (April 2020): 1.

³For an example of an interpretation of constitutional change that emphasizes parallel moments in our history, and concludes that our Constitution will again prove resilient, see Jack M. Balkin, *The Cycles of Constitutional Time* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020). For another synthetic work which draw opposite conclusions following from the unique and grave

from a consideration of two orienting questions. First, do these, or some of these, layered threats to our democracy qualify as existential threats, as Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin has called the climate crisis? Second, are our nation's and our world's current struggles in some way repetitions of similar events in the past, and thus fully amenable to analysis and prescription based primarily on comparative historical analysis?

To be clear at the outset, we believe the crises facing our nation are different in quality and scale—and thus gravity—than any our nation has previously encountered. Some readers will object and claim that “we have faced and overcome such challenges before.” One may take solace from, for example, Jack Balkin's analysis of “constitutional rot and renewal,” in which he carefully examines our current situation's parallels with earlier moments in American history. While there is “no exact analogy” to be found, “there is one fairly close analogy—at least with respect to the problems of high polarization and deep constitutional rot. That analogy is to the end of the 1890s.”⁴ For several reasons we cannot develop here, we think strong “precedence” interpretations, unlike Balkin's very measured reading, underestimate the uniquely dangerous syndrome of antidemocratic dynamics we face today. Relatedly, we increasingly believe that historical parallel and precedent, while valuable for understanding these challenges, and certainly some more than others, are alone insufficient for crafting responses to these exceptional and existential challenges.⁵ Following from these assumptions, our article first argues that political science and APD in particular are, for this moment, too tethered to the past. This tendency limits their social utility. We then argue that APD already provides us with several analytical approaches that can enable a scholarship of foresight: (1) the consideration of temporality, path dependence, and durability as they relate to change over time; (2) a substantive interest in individual agency and in collective action as they collide with structures, that is, of entrepreneurship and mobilization as causes of institutional change; and (3) pattern or cycle recognition, for example, the process tracing of historical episodes to clarify their causal logic as they roughly repeat and unfold over time. Each of these approaches can be repurposed for a scholarship of foresight that accepts some responsibility for helping to guide this polity forward. We then consider what a scholarship of foresight might entail and suggest the gains from prediction, prognosis, and projection—which can inform prescription. Finally, we offer suggestions for advancing this agenda.

In fact, the politics of foresight is a very American enterprise. The Constitution is futurist at base, as it created a cyclical mechanism rooted in the decennial census for the future redistribution of elected federal representatives. As Federalist 56 put it, “The foresight of the convention has accordingly taken care that the progress of population may be accompanied with a proper increase of the representative branch of the government.” The framers knew that the Constitution would help shape the development of a new, complex continental political economy, and they developed complex, interlocking clockworks to regulate the pace

dangers we now face, see Suzanne Mettler and Robert C. Lieberman, *Four Threats: The Recurring Crises of American Democracy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2020).

⁴Jack M. Balkin, “Rot and Renewal: The 2020 Election in the Cycles of Constitutional Time,” *Northeastern University Law Review* 13, no. 2 (2021): 645.

⁵In response to the two core questions posed, the yes–no response dyad points toward adopting the scholarship of foresight. Yes–yes suggests a much heightened urgency for APD scholarship as currently practiced; no–no suggests pursuing non-APD work with low urgency; and no–yes recommends status quo ante, that is, low urgency APD scholarship.

of future political change.⁶ In 1830, John Quincy Adams, having lost the presidency to Andrew Jackson, believed he had retired. “I have had my share in planting Laws and Institutions, according to the measure of my ability and opportunities . . . [now] I plant trees for the benefit of the next age, and of which my own eyes will never behold a berry.”⁷ APD has, across its forty-year history, developed a robust intellectual framework that has illuminated our nation's history. But it is time to focus on the risks to and the “benefit of the next age,” and thus our subfield must directly and urgently consider our shared future.

1. A Subfield Tethered to the Past

Like the law, and all academic communities, political science is strongly and rightly path dependent. Multiple mechanisms channel scholars toward analysis that incrementally advances inherited, prevailing wisdom and doctrine.⁸ Some reasons apply to the discipline as a whole: the necessity to ground new work as an outgrowth of a subfield's intellectual history, a norm that is especially suited to the training imperative of dissertations; intellectual humility; a growing commitment to replication as a means for increasing transparency, reliability, and validity in research; the avoidance of explicit prediction as inappropriate for almost all subfields, given positivist assumptions that observable and measurable factors are essential for investigating causality; and the strong tendency to investigate and interpret structures such as institutions as constraints. Some characteristics of our political system tether the imagination of Americanists in particular, like retrograde and powerfully antidemocratic aspects of the American Constitution, including lifetime appointments for Supreme Court justices or the difficulty of amending the document; incumbency advantages; the power of precedent in the courts; the resource advantages of firms that work to retain advantageous policies and foil new regulations; the fact that major parties seek to sustain for decades regimes melding ideology, interests, and institutions conjoined in a long-ago age; and the purposeful sorting of Americans into negatively polarized and unpersuadable blocks of voters devoted to these two antagonistic regimes. Moe and Howell's aptly named *Relic*, an example of the scholarship of foresight, first takes seriously the imposition of the past on the present, arguing that “Americans are burdened with a government that was designed for a bygone era, by designers who had no idea what society would look like or what its problems would be a hundred years in the future.”⁹ They then

⁶The eighty-five Federalist Papers contain thirty-eight usages of the word *future*, thirty-six of *prescribe/prescription/predict*, twenty of *foresight/foresee(n)*—compared to fourteen of *democracy/democratic*. See also Daniel Kryder and Sarah Staszak, “The Constitution as Clockwork: The Temporal Foundations of American Politics,” paper presented at 2010 Western Political Science Association meetings, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1580858. Late in life, at least four founders continued to ponder America's future. Dennis C. Rasmussen, *Fears of a Setting Sun: The Disillusionment of America's Founders* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021).

⁷He adopted the motto *Alteri Seculo* (Another Century) to capture his bittersweet sense of shifting his work, shaping the future landscape of the nation, from politics to farming. Charles Francis Adams, ed., *Memoirs of John Quincy Adams, Comprising Portions of His Diary from 1795 to 1848*, Vol. VIII (Philadelphia, PA: J. B. Lippincott, 1876), 234.

⁸Oona A. Hathaway, “Path Dependence in the Law: The Course and Pattern of Legal Change in a Common Law System,” *Iowa Law Review* 86 (2001): 101–65; Frédéric C. Sourgens, “The Virtue of Path Dependence in the Law,” *Santa Clara Law Review* 56, no. 2 (2016): 303–74.

⁹William G. Howell and Terry M. Moe, *Relic: How Our Constitution Undermines Effective Government and Why We Need a More Powerful Presidency* (New York: Basic Books, 2016), 45.

prescribe a particular and debatable path forward: creating a more powerful presidency with “fast-track authority” to overcome congressional gridlock, to make government more efficient and accountable and in turn to help stem populist anger. Some backward-looking biases are more specific to APD, such as the way that an historical orientation encourages scholars to see inherent and sufficient value in the persons, ideas, and mechanisms driving past events. Historically oriented work entails years of research and analysis—in effect, high levels of sunk costs—making it cumbersome in responding to rapid, real-world change.¹⁰ Finally, we often repeat but generally do not develop the truism that knowledge of the past can inform our understanding of the present.

These factors slow our adaptation to and experimental responses to an American politics mired in the ineffectual politics of perpetual preemption.¹¹ Elites drive Americans from the center into polar parties trumpeting centuries-old ideologies of state building and state deconstruction.¹² Given this longstanding regime consistency, there is still much to be learned from the lineages of party and policy over the long term.¹³ The founders of APD recognized this and launched and have presided over a remarkably successful intellectual project. But the overall effect of these overlapping path dependencies is to leave our polity—a reliquary of a stubborn Constitution that structures the two parties’ pursuit of aged agendas—without potentially available intellectual guidance. Objective conditions have changed since APD’s founding in 1986, as the new editors of *Studies* have noted, and history, as important as it must remain, must not function as our intellectual safe room. We are members of a profession and citizens of a nation at their own critical junctures. Thus, this moment demands that we carefully disrupt our own rooted institutional-intellectual structures.

2. APD and Foresight

To be sure, APD has matched other subfields in American politics in the influence of its recent investigations and analyses of contemporary democratic erosion and the durability of race-, gender-, and class-based subjugation over time.¹⁴ The subfield’s founders rightly claim

that APD is particularly well-suited to identifying “pathways to the present.”¹⁵ Recent work explores how political development explains contemporary outcomes like the creation and institutionalization of a “policy state,” gridlock during the Obama presidency, the rise of the Tea Party, and the contours of the Trump presidency.¹⁶ APD is thus temporally poised to incorporate foresight into its agenda.¹⁷ Several scholarly themes within APD provide guidance for how our research can embrace forward-thinking, since “current affairs are constantly prompting us to think about how, and with what consequences, institutional legacies project themselves forward.”¹⁸

One of APD’s distinguishing features is its emphasis on conceptualizing and measuring temporality, particularly the ways in which policies alter the political landscape and shape future actions through processes like policy feedback and path dependence.¹⁹ Durability is a central tenet of Karen Orren and Stephen Skowronek’s definition of political development, and many scholars explore how policymakers can purposively design or reform programs to increase it.²⁰ Pamela Herd and Donald Moynihan show how administrative burdens, such as complex regulatory regimes and confusing and stigmatizing application procedures, frustrate citizens who interact with government agencies, negatively shape their views of government, and reduce the future efficacy of social programs by limiting uptake. Herd and Moynihan developed explicit strategies for reducing such burdens, which have informed policymaking in the White House.²¹ Eric

Race and American Political Development,” 593–624; and Eileen McDonagh and Carol Nackenoff, “Gender and the American State,” in *The Oxford Handbook of American Political Development*, ed. Richard M. Valelly, Suzanne Mettler, and Robert C. Lieberman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 112–31; Joseph E. Lowndes, Julie Novkov, and Dorian T. Warren, eds., *Race and American Political Development* (New York: Routledge, 2008); Joe Soss and Vesla Weaver, “Police Are Our Government: Politics, Political Science, and the Policing of Race-Class Subjugated Communities,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 20 (2017): 565–91.

¹⁵Stephen Skowronek and Karen Orren, “Pathways to the Present: Political Development in America,” 27–47; and Theda Skocpol, “Analyzing American Political Development as It Happens,” in *The Oxford Handbook of American Political Development*, 48–68.

¹⁶See Skocpol and Jacobs, *Reaching for a New Deal*; Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson, *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Karen Orren and Stephen Skowronek, *The Policy State: An American Predicament* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017); Zachary Callen and Philip Rocco, eds., *American Political Development and the Trump Presidency* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020).

¹⁷While our article is limited in applying only to historically oriented political science, our perspective is compatible with broader social-cultural and philosophical efforts to reimagine the future. See, for example, Alex Zamalin, *Black Utopia: The History of an Idea from Black Nationalism to Afrofuturism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019); Victoria W. Wolcott, *Living in the Future: Utopianism and the Long Civil Rights Movement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022); William MacAskill, *What We Owe the Future: A Million-Year View* (New York: Basic Books, 2022).

¹⁸Skowronek and Orren, “Pathways to the Present.”

¹⁹See Paul Pierson’s voluminous work on the topic, especially *Politics in Time: History, Institutions, and Social Analysis* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); Suzanne Mettler and Andrew Milstein, “American Political Development from Citizens’ Perspective: Tracking Federal Government’s Presence in Individual Lives over Time,” *Studies in American Political Development* 21 (Spring 2007): 118–25; Suzanne Mettler and Joe Soss, “The Consequences of Public Policy for Democratic Citizenship: Bridging Policy Studies and Mass Politics,” *Perspectives on Politics* 2, no. 1 (2004): 55–73; Daniel Béland, “Reconsidering Policy Feedback: How Policies Affect Politics,” *Administration and Society* 42, no. 5 (2010): 568–90; Andrea Louise Campbell, “Policy Makes Mass Politics,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 15 (2012): 333–51; Eric M. Patashnik and Julian E. Zelizer, “The Struggle to Remake Politics: Liberal Reform and the Limits of Policy Feedback in the Contemporary American State,” *Perspectives on Politics* 11, no. 4 (December 2013): 1071–87.

²⁰Karen Orren and Stephen Skowronek, *The Search for American Political Development* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 123–32.

²¹Pamela Herd and Donald P. Moynihan, *Administrative Burden: Policymaking by Other Means* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2018); Office of Management and

¹⁰The technological world, to take a different example, appears to be gaining speed. Robert Colvile, *The Great Acceleration, How the World is Getting Faster, Faster* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016).

¹¹Stephen Skowronek, *The Politics Presidents Make: Leadership from John Adams to Bill Clinton* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1997). See also Skowronek’s numerous updates in article and interview form, e.g., “What History Tells Us About Trump’s Implosion and Biden’s Opportunity,” *The Nation*, October 12, 2020.

¹²One symptom [of] regime durability is the tendency of Democrats to frame new policy initiatives as echoes of past successes. Observers framed the early Obama presidency as a “New New Deal,” while climate progressives push for a “Green New Deal.” See Michael Grunwald, *The New New Deal: The Hidden Story of Change in the Obama Era* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013); Theda Skocpol and Lawrence R. Jacobs, eds., *Reaching for a New Deal: Ambitious Governance, Economic Meltdown, and Polarized Politics in Obama’s First Two Years* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2011); Lauren Gambino, “Biden’s FDR Moment,” *The Guardian*, March 6, 2021.

¹³When African Americans successfully drove their long-term mobilization for inclusion and equality into the 1950s and ’60s, as disruptive as this process was, the Democratic Party absorbed these claims and converted them into calls for new forms of state expansion. The two parties’ fundamental and polar orientation to institutions of statist intervention remained.

¹⁴See Desmond King and Rogers Smith, “Racial Orders in American Political Development,” *American Political Science Review* 99, no. 1 (2005): 75–92; Desmond King, Robert C. Lieberman, Gretchen Ritter, and Laurence Whitehead, eds., *Democratization in America: A Comparative-Historical Analysis* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009); Robert C. Lieberman, Suzanne Mettler, Thomas B. Pepinsky, Kenneth M. Roberts, and Richard Valelly, “The Trump Presidency and American Democracy: A Historical and Comparative Analysis,” *Perspectives on Politics* 17, no. 2 (June 2019): 470–79; Kimberly S. Johnson, “The Color Line and the State:

Patashnik explains durability as the product of political actors who think temporally and usher reforms through to conclusion, while preventing opponents from shifting the venue of conflict or reorganizing themselves following defeat.²² Alan Jacobs's work on time horizons in elite planning for public investment, pension systems, and governing "for the long term" is another example of a scholarship of foresight.²³ To Jacobs, focusing events, such as Social Security's potential insolvency in the 1970s and 80s, provide policymakers with an opportunity to justify short-term costs in order to ensure stability well into the future. Suzanne Mettler's research on policy maintenance and degradation can inform the design of policy to promote certain future outcomes. For example, policymakers' decision to not peg Pell Grants to inflation has gradually diminished their ability to level the playing field in American higher education.²⁴

APD research also engages with the interaction of structure and agency, seeking the factors that enable entrepreneurs to overcome constraints.²⁵ Adam Sheingate (among others) explores how actors leverage institutional ambiguity to exercise agency in the U.S. Congress or the administrative state.²⁶ American political history is rife with examples of inventive political leaders who have managed to recast institutional structures.²⁷ In their sweeping synthesis of recurring threats to American democracy, Suzanne Mettler and Robert Lieberman describe how varying structural forces—polarization, conflict over "who belongs," economic inequality, and executive aggrandizement—have repeatedly threatened our democracy. While their analysis is structural, their narrative accounts identify pivotal moments when courageous agents—such as Republicans on the House Judiciary Committee who broke with their party to advance Nixon's impeachment—brought democracy back from the brink.²⁸

Budget, "Study to Identify Methods to Assess Equity: Report to the President," July 2021, https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/OMB-Report-on-E013985-Implementation_508-Compliant-Secure-v1.1.pdf.

²²Eric M. Patashnik, *Reforms at Risk: What Happens After Major Policy Changes are Enacted* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008); Jeffrey A. Jenkins and Eric M. Patashnik, eds., *Living Legislation: Durability, Change, and the Politics of American Lawmaking* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012); Eric M. Patashnik, "Limiting Policy Backlash: Taming Counter-Coalitions in an Era of Polarization," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, (September 2019): 47–63.

²³Alan M. Jacobs, *Governing for the Long Term: Democracy and the Politics of Public Investment* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Alan M. Jacobs, "The Politics of When: Redistribution, Investment and Policy Making for the Long Term" *British Journal of Political Science* 38, no. 2 (2008): 193–220; Alan M. Jacobs and J. Scott Matthews, "Why do Citizens Discount the Future? Public Opinion and the Timing of Policy Consequences," *British Journal of Political Science* 42, no. 4 (2012): 903–35.

²⁴Suzanne Mettler, "The Polyscape and the Challenges of Contemporary Politics to Policy Maintenance," *Perspectives on Politics* 14, no. 2 (June 2016): 369–90. In a similar vein, Ryan LaRochelle shows how conservatives have used block-granting to gradually reduce social programs' effectiveness over time—a strategy of deliberate deferred maintenance. Ryan LaRochelle, "The Rise of Block-Granting as a Tool of Conservative Statecraft," *The Forum* 18, no. 2 (2020): 223–47.

²⁵This is an inescapable tension in the study of politics. See Gabriel A. Almond and Stephen J. Genco, "Clouds, Clocks, and the Study of Politics," *World Politics* 29, no. 4 (1977): 489–522. For a wide ranging assessment of this dynamic, see Stephen Skowronek and Matthew Glassman, eds., *Formative Acts: American Politics in the Making* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), particularly the chapters by Skowronek and Glassman, Sheingate, Kryder, and Miroff.

²⁶See Adam Sheingate, "Rethinking Rules: Creativity and Constraint in the U.S. House of Representatives," 168–203; and Alan M. Jacobs, "Policymaking as Political Constraint: Institutional Development in the U.S. Social Security Program," in *Explaining Institutional Change: Ambiguity, Agency, and Power*, ed. James Mahoney and Kathleen Thelen (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 94–131.

²⁷See Bruce Miroff, *Icons of Democracy: American Leaders as Heroes, Aristocrats, Dissenters, and Democrats* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000).

²⁸Mettler and Lieberman, *Four Threats*.

In the first decades after its emergence in the 1980s, in conjunction with an interest in durability as it relates to agency, APD explored the development of institutions, namely the sprawling and fragmented American central state.²⁹ Recently, Elizabeth Sanders, Megan Ming Francis, Daniel Schlozman, Sidney Milkis, Daniel Tichenor, and Sidney Tarrow (among others) have contributed important research on social movements as necessarily engaged with the state.³⁰ Given institutional durability, multiple veto points, and negative polarization, movements seeking transformation deserve more of our attention.³¹ Megan Francis has directly analyzed futuristic thinking and imagination within movements and their relationship to political change. Movements consider choice not only through a logical assessment of political opportunity structures, but also through a "belief in an idealistic dream of a different and more just society ... [and thus] the starting place for any contemporary movement must reside in a bold utopian vision of a new society."³²

Finally, APD research has identified recurring patterns or apparent cycles within American political history, with strong implications for forward-thinking. Foundational works by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and Walter Dean Burnham provided scholars with analytical frameworks to explore how American politics proceeded through cyclical stages that could be radically reoriented by critical realigning elections.³³ Stephen Skowronek's exemplary work on the presidency explores how partisan regimes repeatedly rise and fall over time, and how "failed" presidents signal the arrival of very rare transformative presidencies.³⁴ Nicole Mellow and Jeffrey Tulis, in theoretically related

²⁹See, for example, Stephen Skowronek, *Building a New American State: The Expansion of National Administrative Capacities, 1877–1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Richard Franklin Bensel, *Yankee Leviathan: The Origins of Central State Authority in America, 1859–1877* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Carol Nackenoff and Julie Novkov, eds., *Statebuilding from the Margins: Between Reconstruction and the New Deal* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014).

³⁰See, for example, Elizabeth Sanders, "Presidents and Social Movements: A Logic and Preliminary Results," 223–40; Sidney M. Milkis and Daniel J. Tichenor, *Rivalry and Reform: Presidents, Social Movements, and the Transformation of American Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019); Sidney Tarrow, *Movements and Parties: Critical Connections in American Political Development* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Megan Ming Francis, *Civil Rights and the Making of the Modern American State* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Daniel Schlozman, *When Movements Anchor Parties: Electoral Alignments in American History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

³¹Doug McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); Omar Wasow, "Agenda Seeding: How 1960s Black Protests Moved Elites, Public Opinion, and Voting," *American Political Science Review* 114, no. 3 (August 2020): 638–59; Gillian, *The Political Power of Protest*; Jennifer Earl and Sarah A. Soule, "The Impacts of Repression: The Effect of Police Presence and Action on Subsequent Protest Rates," *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts, and Change* 30 (2010): 75–113. See also the prescriptive work of Erica Chenoweth on the effectiveness of nonviolent protest: Erica Chenoweth, *Civil Resistance: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021); Erica Chenoweth, "The Future of Nonviolent Resistance," *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 3 (July 2020): 69–84; Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

³²Francis, *Civil Rights and the Making of the Modern America State*, 182.

³³Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Cycles of American History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986); Walter Dean Burnham, *Critical Elections and the Mainsprings of American Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1970).

³⁴In a series of articles and interviews, Skowronek has provided a stellar model for deeply informed prognosis and projection regarding the likelihood of alternative future pathways of the Donald Trump and Joe Biden presidencies. Skowronek, *The Politics Presidents Make*. See also Andrew J. Polsky, "Partisan Regimes in American Politics," *Polity* 44, no. 1 (2012): 51–80. Jack Balkin's work uses Skowronek's political time framework as a starting point to explore how constitutional development proceeds along similar cycles. See Balkin, *The Cycles of Constitutional Time*.

work, demonstrate how the ideas of innovative political “losers” persist temporally and eventually emerge with newfound strength given a supportive context.³⁵ APD scholarship has developed a deep and powerful knowledge base and an expansive set of analytical approaches that can be reconfigured and repurposed for a scholarship of foresight.

3. Prognosis, Prediction, and Projection as Tools for Prescription

Reimagining this robust conceptual and theoretical toolkit can help us reorient a portion of the subfield toward a direct engagement with our collective political future. We suggest thinking in terms of prognosis, prediction, and projection, which can all inform prescription. To embrace prognosis is to deploy professional knowledge to offer an evaluation and an explanation of the likely course of, say, a disease or syndrome, with a judgment about the likelihood of recovery or recurrence, the probability of survival, and the expected duration of life. Making such informed judgments about the likely course of a complex malady fits well with Lucian Pye’s classic conceptualization of political development as a “syndrome,” or multidimensional, interactive process of social change in which no fundamental dimension could race too far ahead or lag too far behind without interfering with a nation’s ability to deal with “a range of problems that may arise separately or concurrently.”³⁶ Pye suggested that the political culture of equality, the capacity and legitimacy of state institutions, and differentiation and specialization in the general political process together drive the developmental syndrome.³⁷ It would be useful for APD practitioners to develop normative touchstones other than mere “survival” to better execute prognosis, even though the survival of the Republic is indeed no longer a given.

Prediction, alternatively, may be distinguished from prognosis as the forecasting of a singular outcome or event, such as vote share in a presidential election, analyses of demographic and attitudinal change, or other variables measurable in a series of timed observations. This type of “scholarship of foresight” is thus far practiced mainly by those of us who are statistically oriented, since APD and historical-institutionalist approaches generally offer only limited insight into how precisely we might use our qualitative work to forecast future outcomes. The political world is labyrinthine, and qualitative research is best at depicting complexity and contingency and, at this point, relatively poor at measuring the likelihood of hypothesized causal relationships, or forecasting future outcomes.³⁸ APD’s historical focus and cultural aversion to prediction has meant that we have not yet attempted to develop methods for doing so. In addition to considering ways of adapting political science forecasting models and methods to complex mechanisms, we suggest seriously considering how to adapt the data-mining, predictive-modeling, and analytical techniques that together compose predictive analytics.³⁹ Perhaps there are

other ways for historically oriented political scientists to pursue prediction that are not derivative of these statistical approaches.

Given the complex configurations that characterize most of APD, a more familiar path would be to rethink the analytical approach known as “process tracing” to encompass “process projection”—that is, the extension of complex mechanisms into distinguishable future pathways that appear more or less likely. We do this already in several ways. Research on critical junctures highlights how particular political or economic crises can serve as moments of political opportunity by catalyzing democratic engagement, providing new frames for movement activism, and altering or even upending existing institutional arrangements.⁴⁰ Research in the contentious politics literature, to take another example, demonstrates that at any given moment “repertoires of collective action”—loosely scripted performances—limit movements’ and authorities’ strategic and tactical choices and thus incline interactions toward repetition.⁴¹ A more serious engagement with prognosis, prediction, and process anticipation would underpin a scholarship of foresight and provide the necessary foundations for prescription.

4. Conclusion

Our present crises are too grave, we have argued, to allow inherited professional norms, especially avoiding prediction and eschewing explicit normative claims, to continue to constrain our work. Moving forward, we suggest several ways to turn our attention toward the future. These are intended only as first suggestions, and we hope that this article will prompt community members to consider, critically and creatively, how our scholarly work can contribute to reasoned and principled real-world political contestation and change.

Most obviously, many APD scholars practice the scholarship of foresight already, in the “future implications” passages in conclusions to their books and articles. But these brief gestures toward implications, when they appear at all, are perfunctory. A review of the conclusions of the sixty-eight articles published in *SAPD* since 2016, the year of Donald Trump’s election, finds that only one-third, or twenty-three, contained a reference to either future scholarship or a future policy problem. Those twenty-three articles generated a total of forty-six sentences invoking the future; of those sentences, two-thirds recommended a direction for future scholarship. Only fourteen sentences, across the last 5.5 years of this publication, remarked at all on the likely or the recommended future evolution of real-world politics. Displaying interest in the future seems to be further falling out of favor; the thirty-four articles from 2019 to 2021 generated only seven references of any kind.⁴² Therefore our first recommendation for scholars, editors, and reviewers is to elevate to first order importance the explicit thinking through of the future implications of historically oriented work.

Qualitative Study and Agenda for Future Research,” *International Journal of Information Management* 48 (October 2019): 85–95.

⁴⁰See Ruth Berins Collier and David Collier, *Shaping the Political Arena: Critical Junctures, the Labor Movement, and Regime Dynamics in Latin America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991); Donatella della Porta, *How Social Movements Can Save Democracy* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2020), 6–7.

⁴¹Charles Tilly, *Regimes and Repertoires* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Charles Tilly, Doug McAdam, and Sidney Tarrow, *Dynamics of Contention* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

⁴²We recognize that our own individual work, for example, on racial policies during World War II, and the development and implementation of U.S. social policy, is essentially devoid of such considerations.

³⁵Jeffrey K. Tulis and Nicole Mellow, *Legacies of Losing in American Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

³⁶Lucian W. Pye, “The Concept of Political Development,” *New Nations: The Problem of Political Development*, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 358 (March 1965): 1–13.

³⁷*Ibid.*

³⁸The political science community only dimly foresaw several recent events of global significance as extensions of observable trends, for example, the fall of the Soviet Union.

³⁹Health care systems, among other business sectors, have developed effective procedures for the integration of qualitative research and predictive analytics. See, for example, Shahriar Akter et al., “Analytics-Based Decision-Making for Service Systems: A

Second, we recommend adopting a problem-oriented approach to selecting topics for research and teaching. To guide the identification of “problems,” APD must explicitly embrace two interdependent low-threshold normative goals to guide the future development of our political system, namely, to seek the most expansive democratic means for creating responsive and legitimate state institutions, and to maintain and build state institutions that can manage social problems and complexity fairly and effectively. Teachers, researchers, editors, and publishers must rededicate themselves to promoting and pursuing these values. Our analyses must concretely prescribe how we might better operationalize and secure these values. If we believe in the desirability of democratic governance and the rule of law, our scholarship should directly engage and challenge the arguments of colleagues working on similar problems as well as the arguments of political actors seeking to undermine or pursue those values.

Third, our undergraduate courses now generally dissect our integrated constitutional framework, designed to frustrate change, into discrete and abstract categories like the presidency, public law, or state and local politics. This fragmented pedagogy, designed a century ago, does not readily develop a sense of the whole, the systemic threats facing it, or the problem-identifying and problem-solving skills necessary for creative thinkers of the future. In addition to pursuing an integrated framework, our teaching should receive the institutional support it needs to (1) shift our interpretive frames away from constraints and toward agency, contingency, and innovation; (2) support our efforts to identify important real-world problems through the use of simple principles such as democracy, fair enforcement, and reduction of harm; and (3) provide students with the knowledge, skills, and frameworks that will help them develop solutions to those problems. One’s teaching agenda—in addition to grounding advanced work in the classic themes and scholarship of various subfields—should follow from one’s own answers to the two prognostic questions introduced earlier: Are our current crises system threatening, and does historical study alone provide relevant responses to them? Our proposed pedagogy of foresight follows from our belief that overlapping threats to our democracy requires the purposeful development of approaches that augment our strengths in historical institutional analysis with a consideration of how contemporary political forces will project themselves into the future.

Fourth, we recommend revisiting our approaches to research design, execution, and analysis to aim at improving the content and validity of our projections and our prescriptions. For example, the literature on counterfactual analysis, found primarily in the field of international relations, is largely backward-looking, asking what might have happened if actors had made different choices at pivotal historical moments.⁴³ But this same logic can be used to project processes and mechanisms forward into alternative future pathways.⁴⁴ Drawing on Jack Levy’s work, we urge

APD scholars to “identify the range of choices facing political leaders and the likely consequences of alternative choices given existing constraints”⁴⁵ and track those consequences forward. Given the current precarity of the American political system, APD researchers should continue to integrate research from international relations and comparative politics on the future stability of political regimes.⁴⁶ The deep work in APD on the historical construction of institutional constraint and creative agency also points us to the question of the timing of “regime openness” at all levels of American government as particularly appropriate to this reorientation.

Finally, we recommend the further integration of quantitative and qualitative work and the further cross-pollination of subfields and disciplines to escape from the intellectual boundaries maintained by the categories of knowledge—history, political science, and philosophy—that we have inherited from nineteenth-century academic institutions.⁴⁷ “History is past politics and politics present history,” the motto Herbert Baxter Adams enshrined on the wall of the seminar room at Johns Hopkins University that housed the first generation of historically oriented social scientists in training in the 1880s, is no longer sufficient. Our work should now integrate futurist considerations at the problem identification and research design phases. We urge the APD community to share our professional judgment of the degree of urgency of the problems we identify whenever possible and in whatever venue, and begin to reorient the subfield to elevate the imperative of using our work to imagine and shape future outcomes. This urgency must also extend to university leadership, university boards, and philanthropic institutions.

In 1986, the founding editors of *SAPD*, noting renewed scholarly interest in the study of “complex patterns” of state–society relations, announced that history “would be the proving ground” for claims that institutions, including social and cultural formations, “have an independent and formative effect on politics.”⁴⁸ Since then, APD has produced some of the most creative, synthetic, and insightful accounts of American politics found in the social sciences, and in doing so, we have successfully institutionalized APD. *SAPD*’s founding editors were able to create a journal focused on the historical development of state institutions in part, we venture, because of a sense shared across the academy and across most of our society that the American polity had consolidated its democracy. Not that the core problem of unequal access to the vote or to the ability to participate had been solved—far from it—but that our democracy was on a relatively stable path toward equality in rights. This is in our judgment no longer the case. We can judge the first phase of APD and its focus on the historical development of institutions a very significant intellectual success. Forty years into APD’s existence, it is time to revisit our assumptions and promote careful analysis not only of the past, but also of the present, and especially of our entangled and endangered democratic future.

Competing Interests Declaration. N/A

⁴⁵Jack S. Levy, “Counterfactuals, Causal Inference, and Historical Analysis,” *Security Studies* 24, no. 3 (2015): 383.

⁴⁶See Jack A. Goldstone et al., “A Global Model for Forecasting Political Instability,” *American Journal of Political Science* 54, no. 1 (January 2010): 190–208; Drew Bowlsby, Erica Chenoweth, Cullen Hendrix, and Jonathan D. Moyer, “The Future Is a Moving Target: Predicting Political Instability,” *British Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 4 (Oct. 2020): 1405–17.

⁴⁷For a recent example urging this sort of cross-pollination, see Gregory Wawro and Ira Katznelson, *Time Counts: Quantitative Analysis for Historical Social Science* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022).

⁴⁸Karen Orren and Stephen Skowronek, “Editors’ Preface,” *Studies in American Political Development* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 1–2.

⁴³See, for example, Niall Ferguson, *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals* (New York: Basic Books, 1999); Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, *The World Hitler Never Made* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Philip E. Tetlock, Richard Ned Lebow, and Geoffrey Parker, eds., *Unmaking the West: “What If?” Scenarios That Rewrite History* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006).

⁴⁴National security officials routinely use simulations and scenario-based exercises for both teaching and planning purposes. See, for example, Micah Zenko, *Red Team: How to Succeed by Thinking Like the Enemy* (New York: Basic Books, 2015).