

What's so American about American Political Development?¹

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Earlier today, Anna Law wrote a great post about the differences between American Political Development (APD) and political history. Inspired by some interesting Twitter conversations, I want to follow up on this by raising the question (and offering some tentative thoughts) about the extent to which APD is engaged (or not) with comparative perspectives on political development.

On the one hand, more so than other approaches to studying American politics, APD scholarship was developed to a large extent by scholars with backgrounds in comparative politics. Theda Skocpol is probably best known to APD scholars for her research on early U.S. social policies, but her earliest research was an influential comparative study of “social revolutions” in France, Russia, and China (one that still frames major debates in comparative politics methodology). Similarly, APD scholars are probably most familiar with Ira Katznelson’s work on the role of southern politicians in constraining what was possible in the New Deal era, but his earliest work was an explicitly comparative study of the United States and the United Kingdom.

This comparative influence wasn’t just present at the beginning of the subfield, but rather has persisted in at least some APD scholarship: In trying to make sense of why the United States failed to implement national health insurance during the twentieth century, for example, Jacob Hacker fruitfully compared the sequencing of important policy decisions in the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada to show how these choices constrained what was possible in later periods (theoretical themes that Law highlights as especially important for APD scholars more generally). Robert Mickey’s work on the “paths out of Dixie” taken by three southern states focuses on subnational comparisons instead, but still draws important influence from theoretical frameworks developed by comparative politics scholars. And in David Bateman’s new book on franchise restrictions, he emphasizes the U.S. case, but places it in comparison with the United Kingdom and France.

The vast majority of APD scholarship, though, limits itself to explaining particular outcomes in the American case. In *The Search for American Political Development*, Karen Orren and Stephen Skowronek write this about the relationship between comparative politics and American political development:

[W]hen politics in the United States is situated against politics in other countries, it is likely that the comparisons will be used to highlight what, if any, problems or characteristics of change are peculiar to the historical configuration of government and politics in the United States. This has important advantages, bringing the United States into sharper relief while guarding against unexamined claims of American exceptionalism. With or without the use of comparisons, APD’s single-country focus avoids the side-stepping that sometimes accompanies cross-country data and seeks instead to grapple with political change as it occurs, or not, in a specific place, the United States. It examines the terms, conditions, and meanings of change as these might be understood for this polity.

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APD can be comparative, in other words, but notably it is often comparative with the primary purpose of elucidating America-specific outcomes, rather than generalizing evidence from the United States to larger theoretical debates that are not tied to a specific time or place.

Of course, this is not the only possible way for APD scholars to use comparative perspectives. An alternative would simply be to think of APD as being part of the study of political development writ large: it could still maintain the “distinct set of foci, theories, and methodologies” that Law describes, but emphasize what studies of the United States can contribute to our more general understanding of political development and historical institutionalism, rather than our understanding of America for its own sake. This would help to break the seemingly arbitrary divide between studies of American politics and “comparative politics” (often a shorthand for “studies of things other than American politics”), something that I think APD scholarship is especially capable of doing.

This, though, isn't without potential downsides. Although APD scholars are not as interested in nuance for its own sake as historians might be, they still tend to be relatively more concerned with nuance than the median political scientist. While the “American” in “American Political Development” can sometimes limit us from seeing the benefits of comparative perspectives, it also helps to prevent what Law describes as the “major slippage in the theory and historical practice/belief you are purporting to study and understand” that often results when empirical studies are abstracted away from contextual details. The challenge, then, is finding a balance between the benefits of comparative research and the pitfalls of losing case-specific knowledge.