


American Political Development and the Recovery of a Human Science

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Research Article

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Abstract

Recent political developments point to the presence of grave problems with democratic governance in the United States. They suggest that scholarship in American political development (APD) could be better at studying the experiences and thinking of everyday Americans. APD scholars often study institutional changes, policy initiatives, and other shifts in governance without studying how these developments affect the lives of U.S. citizens and residents. And many developments of critical political importance are ignored or do not receive the scholarly attention they deserve. For our scholarship to do justice to the recent crises and better relate to the political world around us, as several recent past American Political Science Association (APSA) presidents have recommended, the article calls for APD scholarship to be better at focusing on people themselves: on their health and safety, their material standing, and their personal and social educations. By adding a fuller study of people to their research, APD scholars would be better equipped to identify important political developments that do not always capture the attention of Congress, the White House, and the media, but that are too important to ignore.

The disturbing and disastrous events of recent years indicate more than the usual pulling and hauling of politics. As of June 30, 2022, more than 1,000,000 Americans and over 6 million people worldwide reportedly had died from Covid-19. The deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor in the summer of 2020 punctuated the fate of the hundreds of African Americans who have been killed by U.S. police over the last five years.¹ Several members of Congress and a quarter of Republicans either “somewhat” (19 percent) or “strongly” (6 percent) approve of the January 6th storming of the Capitol.² And many members of Congress and one in five Americans do not believe in anthropogenic climate change.³ These phenomena suggest a damaged political system.

In response to the *SAPD*'s editors' question about what the current events reveal about the field of American political development (APD), my answer is that the crises show the need for APD research to be better grounded in the study of people's lives—that is, on their lived experiences and on the pictures of the world they have in their heads.⁴ Shifting APD toward a more human-oriented direction calls, in turn, for a more granular approach and more probing study of how people experience their lives and think of themselves and their environment. This suggests a more holistic study of the American regime,⁵ one that would vitally supplement APD's usual studies of “durable shifts in governing authority,” of other large structures and systemic processes, and of the emergence and recrudescence of political ideas and ideals.⁶ And when serious problems of governance, representative government, and the protection of human rights and fundamental liberties loom and shake the core tenets of American democratic government, then such a research program is even more needed.

This is not what APD (and political science) does, however. We do not, as a rule, “[produce] scholarship ... relevant to public issues”⁷ (although Putnam acknowledges that this is

¹“Fatal Force,” *The Washington Post*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/investigations/police-shootings-database/>, accessed August 17, 2021.

²CBS News, “CBS News poll: Still More to Learn About January 6, Most Americans Say,” July 20, 2021, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/january-6-opinion-poll/>.

³Pew Research Center, “U.S. Public Views on Climate and Energy,” November 25, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2019/11/25/u-s-public-views-on-climate-and-energy/>.

⁴Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: Macmillan 1922), 3–32, *passim*.

⁵Suzanne Mettler and Richard Valelly, “Introduction: The Distinctiveness and Necessity of American Political Development,” in *The Oxford Handbook of American Political Development*, ed. R. M. Valelly, S. Mettler, and R. C. Lieberman (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016), 1–26, 3–4.

⁶Daniel Galvin, “Let's not conflate APD with political history, and other reflections on ‘Causal Inference and American Political Development,’” *Public Choice* 185, no. 3–4 (July 2019): 485–500, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11127-019-00695-3>; Mettler and Valelly, “Introduction”; Karen Orren and Stephen Skowronek, *The Search for American Political Development* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 123; Eric Schickler, “Causal Inference and American Political Development: Common Challenges and Opportunities” *Public Choice*, 185 (2019): 501–11, 501, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11127-019-00690-8>.

⁷Robert D. Putnam, “APSA Presidential Address: The Public Role of Political Science,” *Perspectives on Politics* 1, no. 2 (2003): 249–55, 250.

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not the discipline's sole objective). Instead, "serving the public (and the public interest) has become an after-thought to our other professional rights and duties"; rarely do we "[disseminate] research and [prepare] citizens to be effective citizens and political participants."⁸ Accordingly, Putnam advocates the study of issues of immediate relevance, such as "campaign finance," "diversity and inequality," "health care, military strategy, and the pursuit of human rights."⁹ Or, as Jennings and Katznelson argue, we need to attend to the prevention and treatment of illness, the mitigation of suffering, and the improvement of governance.¹⁰ We need to "find our way to a more decent politics and society under dangerous and difficult conditions";¹¹ we need to embrace our "responsibilities—our contributions to public understanding and to the vitality of democracy."¹²

In Mansbridge's words, "the chief concern of political science" is to resolve "the societal collective action problems."¹³ If citizens are to be able to secure "public access goods" such as "stop[ping] global warming," ending "nuclear proliferation," and "transition [ing] from autocracy to democracy without descending into violence," then they have to be able to agree on a system of mutual coercion.¹⁴ Mansbridge's analysis clearly implicates the study of the collective action with respect to the above four crises.

1. Three Lenses on a Human Science

Why, then, do people matter, and why should they be the center of APD and political science? What underlies the study of political crises and research on the provision of public access goods, I would suggest, is a respect for human dignity and, specifically, three aspects of people's lives: (1) their personal safety and physical and mental health, (2) their material well-being, and (3) their personal development.

Although APD scholars and political scientists rarely make these premises of their research explicit and rarely prioritize the study of people's own experiences and their world views,¹⁵ political scientists routinely include these aspects of peoples' lives in their studies. Research on domestic conflicts, civil unrest, and wars attend to the numbers of injuries, deaths, refugees, and displaced persons (i.e., homeless). Scholars also estimate the costs exacted by the destruction of buildings, roads, physical equipment (e.g., automobiles, aircraft, ships), and other infrastructure (train stations, power plants, etc.). Research in economic development and political modernization may also track the incidence of disease, premature births, and birth defects, and measure life spans. Studies of national budgets, trade agreements, and tax laws may assess the financial and commercial implications of new policies on governments, companies, and individuals. And studies of voter sophistication and public opinion surveys attempt to fathom what citizens know and what they think of politicians, government institutions, political parties, and specific policies.

⁸Putnam, "APSA Presidential Address," 250; also see David M. Ricci, *The Tragedy of Political Science* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987).

⁹Putnam, "APSA Presidential Address," 251.

¹⁰M. Kent Jennings, "Presidential Address: Political Responses to Pain and Loss," *American Political Science Review* 93, no. 1 (Mar. 1999): 1–13; Ira Katznelson, "APSA Presidential Address: At the Court of Chaos: Political Science in an Age of Perpetual Fear," *Perspectives on Politics* 5, no. 1 (March 2007): 3–15.

¹¹Katznelson, "APSA Presidential Address," 12.

¹²Putnam, "APSA Presidential Address," 249–51.

¹³Jane Mansbridge, "Presidential Address: What Is Political Science For?" *Perspectives on Politics* 12, no. 1 (March 2014): 8–17, 8.

¹⁴Mansbridge, "Presidential Address," 8.

¹⁵Mettler and Valelly, "Introduction," 10.

To prioritize human life, whether that of U.S. citizens, legal residents, or undocumented immigrants, is to focus on the first aspect listed above, people's health and safety as a prime end of democratic government. This necessarily implicates the study of disasters, illness, food insecurity, infant mortality, crime, organized violence, and war. "Without governance," Keohane reminds us, quoting Hobbes, "life is 'poor, nasty, brutish and short.'"¹⁶ "Peace, economic development, health, and ecological sustainability all depend on political institutions and on political decisions, and often on leadership."¹⁷ APD scholars can contribute by studying the historical development of the United States and comparing developmental paths across states, thereby providing policymakers with firmer grounding on which to draw the causal inferences able to separate good policies from bad. Absent such research, "leaders would be guided only by their limited personal experiences, historical analogies, and folk wisdom—all highly unreliable as a basis for inference."¹⁸

A second fundamental attribute of political society is the condition of people's material welfare, in both absolute and relative terms (since inequality may adversely affect those living above a "poverty line")—consistent with the studies of economic development and economic inequality.¹⁹ This implicates research on the promotion, preservation, and equitable distribution of individual, corporate, and national wealth. More specifically, such research would focus on the events or policies that enhance (or erode) either individual or public wealth, such as increases in material standing from labor policies or greater purchasing power, or the deadweight losses accrued from fires, natural disasters, and "wars of choice." This would involve studying developments that not only "expand the pie,"²⁰ but also keep the pie intact, guarantee everyone has a slice, and ensure that a larger pie does not leave others with smaller pieces or none.

The third reason why people matter for APD is because of education, broadly understood, or what we might think of as civilization. This is more than humanism—the development of reason, inculcation of knowledge, and improvement of individuals, or civilizing—because it includes people learning their responsibilities to other citizens and their political communities (e.g., voting in local, state, and national elections; wearing masks in the time of contagious diseases). Education may take place through formal institutions or informally through self-education, autodidactically. But it also necessarily occurs socially via political, religious, commercial, and other institutions. As APD scholars and political scientists, we are responsible for the promotion of "public values," "civic education," and "civic-engaged research."²¹

¹⁶Robert O. Keohane, "The Profession: Political Science as a Vocation," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 42, no. 2 (April 2009): 359–63, 362.

¹⁷Keohane, "The Profession," 362.

¹⁸Keohane, "The Profession," 362–63; also see Bo Rothstein, "Max Weber Lecture Series: Human Well-being and the Lost Relevance of Political Science," European University Institute: Max Weber Programme for Postdoctoral Studies, "Max Weber Lecture No. 2014/03 (2014).

¹⁹Keohane, "The Profession," 362; Putnam, "APSA Presidential Address," 251; Katznelson "APSA Presidential Address," 8; Rogers M. Smith, "Presidential Address: What Good Can Political Science Do? From Pluralism to Partnerships," *Perspectives on Politics* 18, no. 1 (2020): 10–26, 21. Also see Jacob S. Hacker, Alexander Hertel-Fernandez, Paul Pierson, and Kathleen Thelen, "Introduction: The American Political Economy: A Framework and Agenda for Research," in *The American Political Economy: Politics, Markets, and Power*, ed. Jacob S. Hacker, Alexander Hertel-Fernandez, Paul Pierson, and Kathleen Thelen, 1–48 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

²⁰Mansbridge, "Presidential Address," 12.

²¹Smith, "Presidential Address," 21.

Without individual and social education, people would be unable to achieve a modicum of personal freedom—the ability to form, understand, express, and act on their own preferences—or participate in politics and government. They would be unable to attend to their own and to society's medium- and long-term public well-being, which in turn would make civil society impossible and render democratic government dysfunctional. In other words, absent consensus on epistemologies, value systems, and first-order social principles, people would be unable to act collectively, incapable of solving local and national problems—or even setting up the quotidian institutions needed to make trade in consumer perishables and air-traffic control possible.²² And for present purposes, they would be unable to establish the processes and organizations needed for a joint collective response to a pandemic, systemic racism, political polarization, and climate change. Members of democratic societies have to be willing to bind themselves to the mast, willing to accept electoral outcomes, presidential actions, court decisions, and other political outcomes. Which, in turn, depends on the confidence in the architecture and constitution of the ship of state. When it comes to personal development and the health of the polity, push-pin, contra Bentham, is not poetry.²³

2. Conclusions

One conclusion is that APD scholars might focus more on policy effects and outcomes. Studies of the evolution of congressional rules and norms, the policy process, changes in the modern presidency, and developments in the federal judiciary would benefit from complementary research on the effects of how the new processes, new bureaucracies, and new judicial developments affect how people consequently experience their lives and think of the political world. Some of political science does this, particularly work on policy feedback.²⁴ Yet much of our research does not include the effects of new or transformed institutions and of reconfigured issues areas on the lives and understandings of workaday Americans—that is, why these on institutional developments matter on the ground.

A second lesson is that APD scholars might include more research on people's education, whether by a study of their schooling and higher education or by examining the social institutions through which they learn about their society and the

world, such as the news media (including social media), political and commercial advertising, television and cinema, and religious organizations. As important as people's health, safety, and material welfare may be to how they understand their situations (whether favorable or unfavorable) every bit as important is the study of the ideas and values through which they experience and comprehend their lives—i.e., Lukes's third dimension of power.²⁵ APD scholars focus on political parties, presidents, public policies, political entrepreneurs, race, gender, the environment, and other phenomena; less often do we study the lenses through which people understand themselves and their own actions and how they view political society at large.²⁶ We could do better at folding the study of political communication (often housed in separate departments in large universities, hived off from political science) into our research.

A third takeaway is that we should leave our offices more and get out into the world. Though many of us consult primary and archival sources, do interviews, engage in ethnography, and read secondary sources in adjacent disciplines (e.g., sociology, communications, and history), we could do better at discerning and uncovering political phenomena that may be sporadically, imperfectly, or obscurely manifest in the public sphere. Instead, we all too often focus on contemporary or recent developments that get attention in Congress or the White House, that attract dominant media coverage, or that receive notice elsewhere in Washington.²⁷ So the profession overlooked the experiences of African Americans in the 1950s, as Rogers Smith points out. It missed the gay and lesbian activism of the 1970s and the preceding decades. It ignored the fate of the Americans of the 1990s and early 2000s working in deindustrializing and rural areas. And it neglected the rise of religious fundamentalism in the 1960s and 1970s.²⁸

Paying more attention to what people do and how they think offers us leverage on those who are both the objects and the ultimate actors of democratic government. With what is at stake, we have no choice.

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²²Mansbridge, "Presidential Address," 9.

²³Jeremy Bentham, *The Rationale of Reward* (London: John and H. L. Hunt, 1825), 206.

²⁴Andrea Louise Campbell, *How Policies Make Citizens* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003); Suzanne Mettler, *Soldiers to Citizens: The G.I. Bill and the Making of the Greatest Generation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Suzanne Mettler, *The Submerged State: How Invisible Government Policies Undermine American Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); 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.

²⁵Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View* (New York: Macmillan, 1974); Katznelson, "APSA Presidential Address," 8.

²⁶See Nina Eliasoph, *Avoiding Politics: How Americans Produce Apathy in Everyday Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

²⁷But see Karen Orren, *Belated Feudalism: Labor, the Law, and Liberal Development* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Chris Howard, *The Hidden Welfare State: Tax Expenditures and Social Policy in the United States* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997); Mettler, *Soldiers to Citizens*.

²⁸Smith, "Presidential Address," 21.