

Race and Politics in America

Michael Bernhard and Daniel O'Neill

The Issue of Race in an Institutional Perspective

The fields of comparative and American politics often gleefully ignore each other. For instance, in the Cold War era, locales outside the “advanced industrial” countries were the objects of “area study” in comparative politics, a theoretical approach that treated the politics of each world region as its own form of exceptionalism. Periodically, there have been moments when Americanists and comparativists “discovered” and deeply influenced each other. For instance, after communism collapsed in Eastern Europe, there was a widespread belief that the literature on democratic institutions pioneered by Americanists would serve well in that context. After all, the argument went, the West had solved the problems of economic management and the practice of representative mass democracy, and thus for others it was just a question of picking the right institutions to share in democracy and prosperity. The largest global recession in 70 years, mass migration of populations in response to an escalating cascade of ecological disruptions, and one pandemic later, the intellectual consensus underlying this belief is more than a bit tarnished.

Instead, we now ignore at our own peril more circum-spect views like those expressed by Dani Rodrik (2011), that not all “good” things are possible at the same time—perhaps high levels of globalization, national sovereignty and democracy are not compatible. Certainly, the present global wave of democratic backsliding is grist for this mill. With these developments the tables have turned, and the work of comparativists who have long studied the failure of democratic regimes has become newly relevant for Americanists (Kaufman and Haggard 2019; Kuo 2019; Lieberman et al. 2019; Weyland 2020). Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (2018) revisited, adapted, and expanded on the ideas of Juan Linz (1978) concerning the dangers to democracy in the age of Trump, and political science as a cautionary tale best seller was born.

Another moment of convergence between the subfields came at the onset of the study of modern democracy in behavioral and functionalist terms. American political scientists thought of the United States as just one of a handful of democracies and sought explanations for the

survival of the lucky few. Among the first to offer a hypothesis was Gabriel Almond (1956), who strongly differentiated between Anglo-American and Continental European democratic systems. Why this partition? Because for Almond the former had homogeneous political cultures, whereas those of the latter were fragmented. In later versions of this argument this difference was put in institutional rather than cultural terms, as the distinction between two-party and multiparty democracies (Almond and Powell 1966). Unified political cultures permitted two-party competition and alternation with cross-cutting cleavages, whereas more fragmented political cultures led to fractured party systems. The examples used to illustrate these different systems were highly value laden, with Anglo-American two-party democracy being seen as high quality and stable, in contrast to the multiparty democracies of the Weimar Republic, postwar Italy, and the fourth French Republic that were seen as flawed and unstable. This understanding of the superiority of two-party systems was shared by Downs (1957) and to some extent by Duverger (1959) as well.

Early dissenters to this consensus, not surprisingly, were European scholars engaged with American political science, including Giovanni Sartori (1966), Dankwart Rustow (1956), and Arend Lijphart (1968). All three noted that there were several European cases—the Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands, and the Federal Republic of Germany—that were multiparty and yet managed to have stable, high-quality democracy. Lijphart made this distinction the centerpiece of his research agenda, coining the concepts of “consociational democracy” and majoritarian versus pluralist varieties of democracy. Focusing initially on the success of democracy in his native Netherlands, Lijphart (1969, 1977) argued that, by a pattern of institutional adaption and the forging of power-sharing institutions, the Dutch were able to create a stable, high-quality democracy despite a political culture divided between a more traditional Protestant community, a secular socialist one, and other smaller communities. The key to solving this riddle was having power-sharing institutions, notably parliamentary coalition government, proportional representation, and federalism fused with a bicameral legislature. Since then, Lijphart (1989, 2012) has argued that

doi:10.1017/S1537592721003121

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pluralist democracy built on such power-sharing institutions does a better job of representing diverse interests and can also provide for stable high-quality democracy.

Why is this relevant to race in the United States? The issue is the characterization of our political culture as unified. From today's perspective, it is hard to see how this was possible when the issue of race and repression had been forcefully raised by W. E. B. Du Bois in now-classic works like *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935). When we discuss the United States, we are talking about a country that 90 years prior to the postwar debate on democratic quality and stability had fought a remarkably bloody Civil War over the existence of slavery and its role in our economy and society. Although the outcome of that struggle was the abolition of slavery, the practices and ideology of white supremacy were perpetuated formally in the states of the former Confederacy through Jim Crow and more informally in the other states of the Union through practices such as redlining, housing covenants, employment and educational discrimination, and even in the landmark legislation of the New Deal (Rothstein 2017).

So, the price of our "unified" political culture after the Civil War was Jim Crow and the exclusion and disenfranchisement of the emancipated slaves and their children from the full benefits of citizenship. In reality, we had a mainly (though not exclusively) unified white political culture that actively worked to exclude African Americans or accepted their exclusion to achieve other aims (Blight 2001). Under such conditions our majoritarian institutions provided stable government but at the price of the disenfranchisement of a substantial body of citizens; this disenfranchisement also excluded women, lower-class whites barred by the poll tax measures meant to exclude African Americans, Hispanic populations in the Southwest, and Native Americans (Perman 2003; Valley 2004). Writing in the 1990s, Rogers Smith (1993, 549) noted, "For over 80% of U.S. history, its laws declared most of the world's population to be ineligible for full American citizenship solely because of their race, original nationality, or gender. For at least two-thirds of American history, the majority of the domestic adult population was also ineligible for full citizenship for the same reasons." Rather than being a paradigmatic liberal democratic society marked by a largely universal commitment to freedom and equality as envisioned by Tocqueville, Hartz, Myrdal, and their intellectual heirs, the United States instead evinced "multiple traditions," including a deep and abiding commitment to multiple forms of inequality or "ascriptive Americanism." As Smith (1997, 17–18) pointed out, "Taken together, nonwhite, nonmale, non-Christian, non-heterosexual peoples have always comprised the vast majority of the world's population, and they have always added up to far more than a majority of inhabitants of the territorial United States as well. Yet their places and roles

in American society have never been captured by the categories analysts stress in characterizing American politics." In retrospect, it is indefensible that a system so constituted was categorized as high-quality democracy. That we saw ourselves as a high-quality democracy in the face of the existence of a whole region subject to one-party authoritarian rule (Mickey 2015) shows how for a very long time the race blindness of American political science distorted our understanding of our own political reality (Smith 2004).

The second (or practical) enfranchisement of Black Americans with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act in 1965 led to optimism about the prospects for a more integrated and inclusive society. Although there have been some areas of progress, the legal barriers to equality under Jim Crow were for a time replaced by covert dog whistle racism (Carmines and Stimson 1989) and the use of the wars on drugs and crime as means to exercise control over African American communities through aggressive policing, harsh and differential sentencing, and the expansion of the carceral state (Alexander 2010; Campbell and Schoenfeld 2013; Schoenfeld 2012; Weaver and Lerman 2010).

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 was passed by a strong bipartisan majority but led to the realignment of the one-party Democratic South to a solid Republican South, followed by the collapse of moderate Republicanism in the North (Carmines and Huckfeldt 1992). With the changing demographic balance in the country, the post-realignment Republican Party now faces what can be called the "*Honorationenpartei* dilemma." Before the age of mass politics many political parties—in particular, conservative parties—were composed of upper-class notables from many localities who shared a certain ethos and status and a very loose organization (Weber 1978, 1130). In his comparative study of the role of conservative parties in processes of democratization, Daniel Ziblatt (2017) contrasts the choices made by the Conservative Party in Britain and the German National People's Party (DNVP) and other conservatives in Germany. By using issues that cut across class lines like religiosity, empire, and tradition, the Tories in Britain were able to create an electorally competitive mass party that could hold its own against both the Liberal Party and the rising Labour Party. In contrast, the DNVP and its progenitors remained an elite party and was less effective in attracting electoral support. German conservatives used the privileged executive position of the kaiser, preserved antiquated and unequal systems of voting, repressed their Catholic and Socialist competitors, and resorted to a range of dirty tricks to bolster their electoral position. Under Weimar, they played the electoral game for a while but then relied on emergency powers under the constitutional kaiser-ersatz, President Hindenburg, to rule without a parliamentary majority, considered launching their own coup against

democracy, and made the fatal error of supporting the Nazis in 1933, leading to their own historical eclipse.

Returning to our contemporary Republicans, in some sense the unrealized Big Tent strategy advocated by George Bush and Karl Rove was a Tory response to the contemporary conundrum of the Republican Party. In a political landscape in which immigration is growing and one's opponent tends to attract the votes of new immigrants, the winning move is to find a way to split that vote. Bush and Rove believed that there were elements among new immigrant groups and even among upwardly mobile African Americans who would be attracted to a program of traditional values and free-market economics (Philpot 2009). For Rove this move made a Republican majority a potentially long-term outcome. Although such a program might be compatible with prejudice in the halls of the country club, it does not work with overt white supremacy.

Trump's overt racism and active hostility to immigration buried the last vestiges of the Rove/Bush vision of an expansive and "compassionate conservatism" and thus anything that approximated Benjamin Disraeli's British notion of "Tory democracy" in the United States. Given the demographics, however, there is no democratic solution to the problem of taking and holding power while relying solely on the Trump base. Pursuit of this racist option for the Republican Party requires gerrymandering, voter intimidation, and using electoral law to disenfranchise groups that vote strongly for the Democrats: immigrants, African Americans, Native Americans, and young people.

In a sense, the populist version of the Republican Party is asserting its right to select who counts as "the people" and to deny a voice to those who are politically inconvenient. Under this scenario American elections will be transformed from contests not only over who gets to rule but also how they get to rule. This turns every election into a referendum on democracy. When this is the case, our democracy sits on a perpetual precipice of failure. The difference between democracy and autocracy will hinge on factors like whether our economy goes into recession under a Democratic president. The failure of democracy itself may be even more academic, because the last time a party has held the presidency for three consecutive terms was Reagan–Bush I, which is more than 30 years ago (Shafer and Wagner 2019). The question remains whether we have enough time to break this impasse.

To a large extent, the contours of the two-party system are responsible for our current crisis. The system only allows for alternation between the two major parties, and if one of them is captured by an authoritarian leader, then alternation in power, which is necessary for democracy, becomes instead a threat to democracy. Furthermore, because our two-party system is based on plurality elections rather than majority elections, it allows for minority

rule. This is exacerbated by aspects of American federalism, notably the Electoral College, the structure of representation in the Senate, and the ability of state legislatures to gerrymander electoral districts. All this makes it quite possible for a party that receives fewer votes than its competitor to be the ruling party (Grofman 2021). Whereas in the eighteenth century these institutions were revolutionarily democratic, today they look increasingly like a long-institutionalized version of the uneven playing field that Levitsky and Way (2010) use to characterize competitive authoritarian institutions. This makes the American system one that now risks alternating back and forth between electoral authoritarianism and liberal democracy. The question is whether the next threat of electoral authoritarianism will flip us permanently in that direction. The irony of our situation is that a former president with only a minority mandate now seeks to delegitimize a president who defeated him with a clear democratic mandate of more than seven million votes.

Facing this dilemma, the most common solutions we hear bandied about are working to somehow reduce popular polarization and returning to legislative bipartisanship. Others talk about a recapture of the Republican Party by moderate or principled elements. The chances for success of these options strongly diminished when the Republican caucus in Congress rejected the opportunity to remove the albatross of Trump from around the neck of the party. The issue is Trump's control of his so-called base, which allows him to threaten any elected Republican by "primarying" them. This control, in turn, as with all authoritarian leaders, allows him to demand the signaling of obedience from members of the party in increasingly outlandish ways—coercing Republicans with ambition to lie, cheat, or break the law for him. The specter of Ted Cruz and George P. Bush attempting to curry favor with Trump after he had disparaged their families repeatedly is shocking but also enlightening. Trump has been able to exploit the residual predemocratic weaknesses of our republican form of government and threatens to destroy the democratic progress that has been built by centuries of struggle—by the Civil War, the New Deal, the civil rights movement, and other movements to enfranchise Americans denied the equal rights of citizenship. The backlash against inclusion has in the last years taken on an intensified white supremacist and authoritarian character. The ultimate insult is that Trump and his followers brand this as the essence of American identity.

The majoritarian, two-party system that the pioneers of political science presented as the epitome of stability and high-quality democracy was based on ignoring the fact that it excluded a large percentage of the population, most critically African Americans. The assumption that undergirded that assessment of a unified political culture (while writing Black and other minority populations out of the account) no longer exists. We are rapidly approaching the

day when Americans of European heritage will no longer be a majority but a plurality. We have a more fragmented political culture, and those who have been excluded will not be returned to that status except by authoritarian means. The solution to this problem is to reform our system of institutions so that they can manage the structure of conflicts that exist in our society. This is the key to stable and effective democracy (Przeworski 1991).

Against this backdrop, it may be time to contemplate deeper transformations to our political institutions. We now need a set of institutions congruent with a more fragmented political culture. This could start with the parliamentarization of our democracy with the adoption of a system of proportional representation (PR) to ensure the representation of diverse populations and interests in line with their demographic weight. It might also entail seriously defanging if not abolishing an increasingly impregnable and imperial presidency that facilitates abuses of power, often on the basis of minority support, and perhaps even replacing it with a prime minister dependent on parliamentary consent. Such reforms would also create a system of representation that captures the fragmented nature of our current political culture. We do not want to be misconstrued here: we are not fragmented and polarized because we are multiracial, but because of different orientations toward many salient issues—most importantly, but not exclusively, race—between our political parties and among factions within them. Today, such reforms are of critical importance because the most powerful faction in one of our parties has increasingly embraced an antidemocratic program of white “protectionist” politics as its preferred strategy for taking and holding power (Smith and King 2021).

Multiparty parliamentarism would also promote coalition government between competing interests, thereby facilitating compromise and reducing the probability of legislative deadlock, because deadlocked governments are more apt to lose confidence and be brought down early. PR reduces the danger posed by demagogues, because their chances of having an outright majority in parliament is diminished compared to our current winner-take-all system.¹ Idiosyncratic, self-indulgent, and erratic executive behavior would be tempered by coalition partners who would fear the damage it would pose to their fortunes in the next electoral cycle. Finally, multipartyism would make it hard for any executive who lost power to keep a stranglehold on a substantial portion of the electorate.

It is time to seriously explore major structural reform to preserve our democracy. The present system is broken and getting worse by the day. The founders whose institutional vision won out feared majority rule (Kramnick 1988); our national nightmare is repeated minority rule that undermines democracy. Radical institutional reform may be the only path to transforming the United States’ long history of ascriptive Americanism based on race.

The Articles

For those of you wondering if this issue’s articles were sent in response to our call for papers on Black Lives Matter (BLM), the answer is no. The discipline is doing a great deal of excellent work on race in the United States, and because we received so many quality submissions in this area, we bundled them together for this issue. We also have a substantial number of papers under review in response to that call. The BLM special issue will come out next year.

Our first offering for this issue is “Do Voters Prefer Just Any Descriptive Representative? The Case of Multiracial Candidates” by Danielle Casarez Lemi. Here she uses a conjoint survey experiment on Asian, Black, Hispanic, and White voters to explore voter response to candidates who are associated with more than one racial identity. She finds that such candidates have advantages in building cross-racial support but sometimes experience difficulties with the strongest identity partisans of their own groups.

Recently, political scientists have begun to seriously consider the ways in which territorial expansion and dispossession of Indigenous peoples have shaped American democracy. In “Our Democracy,” David Myer Temin reconstructs the work of the Oneida political thinker and activist Laura Cornelius Kellogg (1880–1947) to show how her political theory of “decolonial-democracy” challenges settler colonial and imperial domination by foregrounding an alternative project of Indigenous self-determination with reimagined democratic narratives, values, and institutions. Temin reads Kellogg’s 1920 pamphlet *Our Democracy and the American Indian* as articulating a counter-politics envisioning a form of relational self-determination within a confederated, multinational political order marked by a practical commitment to decolonialism.

In “Submerged for Some: Government Visibility, Race, and American Political Trust,” Aaron Rosenthal documents a racial divide in the visibility of the American state. For people of color, the state manifests itself conspicuously through the criminal justice system while simultaneously paying less attention to the protection of civil rights. In contrast, whites perceive the state as funding programs that benefit groups other than them and are unaware of the ways in which they benefit from state programs. This difference in how groups understand the role of the state in their lives affects their levels of trust. For whites, their level of trust is connected to their attitudes about welfare, and for people of color, their feelings about the police are more important.

Sally Nuamah investigates how resource-poor minorities participate in the policy process and how this affects them in “The Cost of Participating while Poor and Minority: Toward a Theory of Collective Participatory Debt.” Based on fieldwork on school closures in two large cities over a period of years, in which 90% of inhabitants are poor and Black, the study reveals how participants

develop civic skills and contribute to their sense of personal efficacy. However, their failed struggles to stop school closures have a negative impact on their perception of politics, policy, and the value of participation

Given the twentieth anniversary of the tragic events of 9/11, the next article could not have been better timed. After 9/11 Muslim Americans were subjected to more intense surveillance by the American state, as well as an increase in Islamophobia by society at large. In “Researching American Muslims: A Case Study of Surveillance and Racialized State Control,” Hajer Al-Faham explores two very important impacts that this double burden has had on conducting fieldwork among Arab American Muslims and Black American Muslims. First, heightened surveillance and prejudice made it harder to access communities and recruit subjects, thereby impeding data collection. Second, the substantive effect of surveillance and prejudice also changed the subjects, affecting their sense of identity, political attitudes, and willingness to engage in civic activism.

Morris E. Levy and Dowell Myers explore American reactions to the changing composition of our society in “Racial Projections in Perspective: Public Reactions to Narratives about Rising Diversity.” Predictions of the incipient loss of white-majority status have had an impact on political behavior and voting in the United States. Using survey experiments the authors explore what the ramifications are when this change is framed in ways that do not use the white/nonwhite binary. White Americans experience that binary as more threatening compared to other narratives of a multiracial society. Nonwhite Americans respond positively to all narratives of rising diversity, regardless of framing.

Hakeem J. Jefferson, Fabian G. Neuner, and Josh Pasek investigate the impact of motivated race-based reasoning in “Seeing Blue in Black and White: Race and Perceptions of Officer-Involved Shootings.” Using data from the period just after the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson in 2013, they investigate the emergence of racial division. They find that whites were more open to information that supports claims of justified shooting, whereas Blacks are more apt to prefer information that implied police actions were inappropriate.

Jennifer Hochschild, Spencer Piston, and Vesla Weaver probe the question of race and inequality in “My Group or Myself? How Black, Latino, and White Americans Choose a Neighborhood, Job, and Candidate when Personal and Group Interest Diverge.” Using an experimental design, they look at which factors lead more prosperous members of different racial groups to leave the environment of their group. In comparing responsiveness to incentives to leave, they find the propensity to leave is stratified by education but only for Blacks and Latinos; they do not find a corresponding effect for whites.

The reemergence of a significant rural–urban divide in American politics is the subject of Matthew D. Nelsen’s

and Christopher Petsko’s “Race and White Rural Consciousness.” They ask the provocative question whether rural consciousness is appreciably different from racial prejudice. Surveying a population in Wisconsin, they examine the relationship between rural consciousness, racial resentment, and political attitudes in the ANES 2019 Pilot Study. The survey found that rural Wisconsinites thought of city dwellers, particularly Milwaukeeans, as having more negative attributes, many of which are associated with negative stereotypes of African Americans. Yet rural consciousness correlated not only with negative assessments of the urban population but also with racial resentment. Controlling for racial resentment significantly reduced the association between rural consciousness and negative assessments of city dwellers.

This issue also includes three provocative reflections. Sarah Hughes discusses “Flint, Michigan, and the Politics of Safe Drinking Water in the United States.” This contribution explains the massive policy process failure that provoked the Flint water crisis. The analysis brings to the fore the particular vulnerability of poor and minority communities in the United States to the marginalizing effects of rationalized policy in this particular tragic case and more generally.

The last two reflections look at unplanned negative outcomes of the American carceral state. In “Throwing away the Key: The Unintended Consequences of ‘Tough-on-Crime’ Laws,” Frank R. Baumgartner, Tamira Daniely, Kalley Huang, Sydney Johnson, Alexander Love, Lyle May, Patrice McGloin, Allison Swagert, Niharika Vattikonda, and Kamryn Washington point out how the long sentences associated with “tough-on-crime” policies have created a new class of geriatric prisoners who are expensive to house, pose no threat to public security, and suffer unnecessary cruelty by continued incarceration. Jacob Swanson and Mary Fainsod Katzenstein document the negative effects of contemporary prison privatization in “Turning over the Keys: Public Prisons, Private Equity, and the Normalization of Markets behind Bars.” They focus on the private–public prison partnerships, including with private equity investment firms, and look at the consequences of the extraction of profit from the prison sector. They identify the added burden this puts on the families of the incarcerated and how it exploits the traditional caregiving role of female partners who remain on the outside while also shouldering the burden of breadwinners. This allows firms to place part of the economic burden of supporting the incarcerated on their families on the outside as a way of increasing the profitability of their investments.

Bigger, Better Perspectives

Our next issue marks the twentieth volume of *Perspectives on Politics*. We will continue to increase the volume of articles and reflections we publish, while maintaining the

size of the book review section: at roughly 90 books reviewed each issue, it currently takes up about 148 pages. Volume 20, no. 1, will have an additional 32 pages of front-end content (growing from ~200 to 232 pages).

Note

1 Though the dangers of mixed winner-take-all/proportional and proportional systems that reward large parties are greater. Witness the constitutional majorities that the former yielded for Fidesz in Hungary and that the latter yielded for Law and Justice in Poland.

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