

Comparing America: Reflections on Democracy across Subfields

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Is America in a period of democratic decline? I argue that there is an urgent need to consider the United States in comparative perspective, and that doing so is necessary to contextualize and understand the quality of American democracy. I describe two approaches to comparing the United States: the first shows how the United States stacks up to other countries, while the second uses the theories and tools of comparative politics to examine relationships between institutions, actors, and democratic outcomes. I then draw on research in three literatures—clientelism and corruption, capitalism and redistribution, and race and ethnic politics and American Political Development—to lay out a research agenda for closing the gap between the subfields of American and comparative politics. In doing so, I also argue for richer engagement between academics and the public sphere, as opportunities for scholars to provide commentary and analysis about contemporary politics continue to expand.

Is democracy over in America? Ours is a time of high stakes and dire predictions. After decades of rising inequality and political polarization at home, and democratic recession abroad, political scientists are weighing in on the fate of the American republic (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Albertus and Menaldo 2018; Mounk 2018; Lieberman et al. 2018). In doing so, they are bringing comparative lessons to bear on the study of American politics. This body of work, and the conversations it has produced in circles of academics, journalists, and citizens requires us to think more rigorously about the United States as a case in comparative analysis.

Problems with American democracy, including unequal representation, the fusion of economic and political elite interests, inequality and poverty, racial exclusion, and more recently, attacks on democratic institutions and nativist rhetoric, are not isolated within our borders. Nor do they necessarily take on unique American dimensions. Understanding these problems requires more than simply

situating them comparatively, and showing how American democracy performs relative to its counterparts. Instead, scholars are well served by the theories, concepts, and methodologies of comparative politics, since many of the issues of concern to observers of American democracy are fundamental issues in the comparative subfield.

There has been a steady drumbeat of exceptional research on American democracy. Elected officials are overwhelmingly more responsive to the interests of affluent voters than the interests of poor and low-income voters, with dramatic consequences for redistributive policy, goods provision, and income inequality (Gilens and Page 2014; Page, Bartels, and Seawright 2013; Bartels 2008; Hacker and Pierson 2011; Gilens 2012). As polarization between the parties has risen, affective polarization has also risen in the electorate, with voters increasingly mapping partisan attachment on their social identities (Mason 2018; Iyengar and Krupenkin 2018). The bureaucratic apparatus of the United States, far from being “weak,” is instead a network of contractors and private actors whose work falls outside channels of public engagement or accountability (Mettler 2011; DiIulio 2014; Campbell and Morgan 2011; Michener 2018). These are not unique American attributes. Instead, they describe the way politics and states have operated in many regions, at various points in time.

This research has taught us a great deal about the extent of democratic dysfunction in the United States. We know that on many indicators the United States is worse off than even a few decades ago: more polarized, more distrusting, more unequal; its civic organizations, unions, and communities are more decimated, its state more captured. What is striking about this is that we have

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the conceptual and analytical tools to understand *all* of these problems as comparativists—and to do so with greater breadth. Comparative politics examines specific attributes of politics that help us assess the quality of democracy by asking, for example, whose interests are represented in democracies? What social protections exist, how redistributive are their effects, and who benefits from them? How can state institutions be protected from rent-seeking and predation? How do institutions mitigate conflict in divided societies?

By beginning from the premise that all democracies face challenges, and that all democratic outcomes are, to a large extent, suboptimal, we can better answer questions about how and why we face our current political crises. Comparative politics contextualizes issues ranging from clientelism and state capture to inequality and redistribution; from regulation of capitalism to the legacy of slavery and maintenance of racial hierarchy. A comparative lens helps us explain the trajectories and processes that produce both democratic progress and rollback, showing us that many “undemocratic” American outcomes are precisely what we should expect to see.

I begin by laying out a case for political scientists to examine America in comparative perspective, a goal that has been advocated far more than it has actually been achieved. I then articulate two approaches to comparing the United States. The first approach tries to place America in a comparative context by evaluating how America stacks up to other countries. This is the approach taken by organizations that develop indicators of democracy, and by recent books that describe how democracy deteriorates. These are largely descriptive enterprises that help us understand the degree to which the United States deviates from, or conforms to, broader international trends. The second approach uses theories, concepts, and methods in comparative politics to think about aspects of American democracy. It adheres to a goal within comparative politics to develop general theories of politics (with the usual caveats and scope conditions), with the United States providing comparative leverage. While both approaches serve useful purposes in helping to understand American politics, I argue that the second approach is the more productive and necessary route to encourage dialogue across subfields.

Part of the motivation of this essay is that the public sphere is (rapidly) expanding, through new technologies and new journalistic models that value timeliness over rigor. Research in political science has become widely accessible to the public—often before it is peer-reviewed and published. As academics, our work is required to adhere to high standards of empirical analysis. As commentators, however, academics are given freer rein to make claims. We need to tread carefully. There is high demand for understanding how to improve our democracy: philanthropic organizations, universities, think tanks, and, of

course, policymakers, are all looking to academia for tractable solutions to our democratic malaise. There is an opportunity to make a case for comparative perspectives beyond the academy, given overwhelming evidence that longstanding problems in democratizing contexts are relevant to the United States. While there are reasons to be uneasy about “policy-relevant” research, it is nonetheless necessary to think about how comparative analysis helps us better understand not just how we got here, as a country, but also how we might improve.

Why Compare?

Why might a comparative perspective on American politics be useful? The year Donald Trump was elected was the same year that Marine le Pen made it to the final round of the French presidential election, Britons voted to exit the European Union, and democratically-elected leaders like Viktor Orban and Recep Tayyip Erdogan did serious damage to democracy in their countries. The challenges to advanced democracies include populism, erosion of trust in national governments and political parties, and rising income inequality. Globalization has had a profound impact on local economies and labor markets; migration has fueled ethno-nationalist backlashes. As Larry Diamond (2015) and others have noted, we are living in a period of democratic retreat around the world.

It is incumbent on us, as scholars and educators, to think about how our research can best answer questions that arise in times of crisis. If our current disciplinary tools are insufficient to address these questions, then we have an opportunity to reevaluate shibboleths and conventional wisdoms about how we “do” political science. My hope is that we can finally lay claims and fears of American exceptionalism to rest, despite the many unique aspects of American democracy (see, e.g., Flaherty 2017; Linz and Stepan 2011; King and Lieberman 2009).

In calling for a more rigorous integration of the fields of comparative and American politics, I link trends in the current literature to a long and distinguished tradition in political science. The fields of American and comparative politics were not always so distinct. Because the United States democratized, industrialized, and hegemonized earlier than most other countries, it has long been used as a baseline in comparative analysis. Seminal studies of democratic institutions and publics by de Tocqueville, Ostrogorski, Bryce, and Lowell tried to understand the commonalities and differences between America, Britain, and France. They were then accompanied by Werner Sombart’s *Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?*, Louis Hartz’s *The Liberal Tradition in America*, and Lipset’s *American Exceptionalism*, which laid out compelling cases for American exceptionalism. Focusing on the United States’ unique set of institutions, its fractured working class, and its weak social protections, they

established a prevailing assumption that the United States was too unlike its advanced democratic counterparts to be comparable.

Since then, the fields of American and comparative politics have diverged such that there is little appetite for engaging the United States comparatively. Even the study of political development splintered into the fields of American Political Development and comparative politics, with little overlap or dialogue between them (Morgan 2014). As Linz and Stepan (2011, 842) noted in an article on inequality and the quality of American democracy in comparative perspective, better integration of the subfields in political science “would require surmounting some powerful barriers that have arisen.” These barriers are related to both supply and demand.

First, there are few outlets that are interested in publishing this kind of work. *Studies in American Political Development* was created with the explicit intention to examine American institutional change, and welcomed comparative perspectives. However, Linz and Stepan (2011) found that only about 7% of articles published in the journal between 1986–2011 were comparative. Morgan (2014) further showed that *Politics and History* and *The Journal of Policy History* are dominated by APD, while fewer than 4% of the articles published in *Comparative Political Studies* between 1968–2014 included the United States. A series at Princeton University Press dedicated to “historical, international, and comparative perspectives” on American politics remains a small imprint, and few of its books are comparative. Given that much of the work that compares the United States is descriptive or qualitative, it faces the typical problems associated with submitting to the top political science journals. Unsurprisingly, given that the subfields of American and comparative politics have developed their own journals, research agendas, and APSA committees, it can be hard to find the right fit for work that traverses both fields.

Second, political scientists are not trained to understand America in comparative perspective. Graduate programs tend to have students train in one field (of American *or* comparative politics), with a minor or secondary field. The subfields used to be “closer” when Americanists nonetheless needed to fulfill language requirements or opted to minor in comparative politics, as opposed to international relations or political theory. Today, many programs have added methodology as a fifth subfield. Owing to the pressures of the limited job market and of publication, there are clear advantages to choosing methodology as a secondary field and to producing work that has a clear subfield market.

Linz and Stepan (2011, 842) blame the gulf between subfields on Americanists, who they feared might not “be able to pursue sufficiently broad questions about the United States,” since they have little knowledge of other

countries. They wondered if there will be “solid successors to those scholars who profitably combined Americanist and comparative research, to the enrichment of both subfields,” such as Paul Pierson, Theda Skocpol, and Ira Katznelson. Further, the subfield’s “preoccupations with electoral-representative processes, citizen opinion and participation, politics within and among branches of national government, and policy struggles among organized interest groups” allows sophisticated examination of narrow and technical aspects of American politics that make it seem highly incomparable (Soss and Weaver 2017, 566). Few Western democracies have primary elections, deregulated campaign financing, decentralized and partisan election administration, and even a presidency. For those reasons, Americanists are quick to dismiss comparative inquiry into broader aspects of our democratic system.

Within comparative politics, scholars have also been reluctant to take up more than a cursory glance at the United States. Comparativists often note that processes such as development and democratization deviate from the historical experience of America (Gerschenkron 1962; Prasad 2016; Haggard and Kaufman 2016). They are reluctant to test hypotheses about political development *on* the United States, or to develop analytical dimensions that allow fruitful integration of America as a comparative case.¹ In a *World Politics* article reviewing four American and comparative books—Kimberley Johnson’s *Governing the American State* and Jacob Hacker’s *The Divided Welfare State*, and Anna Grzymala-Busse’s *Rebuilding Leviathan* and Daniel Ziblatt’s *Structuring the State*, respectively—King and Lieberman laid out compelling ways to unite the subfields in research on state-building. They argue, for example, that new approaches to state-building across subfields has the mutual benefit of “resolv[ing] paradoxes of the American state” and also showing how “American patterns offer comparative lessons” (King and Lieberman 2009, 549). This was a powerful argument, and one that can and should be expanded to other areas of inquiry. Next, I describe two routes for comparing the United States.

Comparative Approaches (I): How Does America Stack Up?

The first approach to comparing the United States is quite literal: it involves placing the United States in a comparative context in order to assess how America compares to other countries. For the second consecutive year, the Economist Intelligence Unit has graded America a “flawed democracy” owing to the public’s declining trust in democratic institutions. In its global ranking of democracy, the United States stands in twenty-first place. Freedom House recently downgraded America from a score of 1 to 2 on political rights, owing “to growing evidence of Russian interference in the 2016 elections,

violations of basic ethical standards by the new administration, and a reduction in government transparency.” The Electoral Integrity Project used Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) scores to rank the election quality not only of the United States (which scored the lowest among twenty-eight Western democracies), but also of the fifty states within the United States. These measures are imperfect, but nonetheless reveal the ways that America is exceptional with regards to its relatively lower democratic performance.

Linz and Stepan used this comparative approach in their examination of inequality in the United States. As scholars of democratic institutions and democratic transition, they argued that while American inequality was bad *per se*, it was even more noteworthy that America is “now the most unequal longstanding democracy in a developed country in the world,” and that “locating these problems in a larger, comparative context” is necessary (Linz and Stepan 2011, 841). Using data from the United Nations Development Programme, the Luxembourg Income Study, and the Centre for Economic Performance, they showed how poorly America fares in its level of income inequality (even after transfers), its levels of poverty, and its levels of economic mobility. Theirs is not a cross-national analysis, but one which uses cross-national data to highlight just how much the United States deviates from other industrial democracies.

The utility of this descriptive approach is that it confronts us with uncomfortable facts about the quality of American democracy. It can also help us think about the inputs to democracy, and what factors are more or less important to democratic stability. Beyond merely explaining where the United States is situated compared to other countries, this approach also shows us how contingent many aspects of democratic norms and culture can be. The question of “could it happen here” can only be answered by looking at what has happened out there, outside our borders.

This is the approach taken by the scholars weighing in on American democracy a few years into the Trump presidency. Levitsky and Ziblatt, for example, in *How Democracies Die*, present a compelling narrative about the importance of the “soft guardrails” of democracy—norms of mutual toleration and forbearance—and show 1) how the elimination of these guardrails led to democratic breakdown in other countries, including Turkey, Hungary, and Venezuela; and 2) how they have been challenged in the United States. Other work tries to compare the current political climate in the United States to explicitly undemocratic outcomes (Snyder 2017, Albright 2018). This body of work, ever-evolving, shows that the distinctions we draw between democratic and non-democratic modes of government are fuzzy at best, and that democracy relies in large part on beliefs and practices that are easily eroded (Helmke and Levitsky 2004).

However, the approach of contextualizing American democracy using comparative indicators or explanations of political processes elsewhere is also limited. The “crisis” we now face was long in the making. Inequality and polarization have been on the rise since the Reagan presidency (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2016; Hacker and Pierson 2011). The right has long assailed the so-called bias of the press, with President George W. Bush describing a “reality-based community” of journalists and warning about listening to “the filter” (Suskind 2004). Delegitimation of the state began with Reagan, and continued through Bill Clinton’s claims that “the era of big government is over.” The growing distance between parties and voters has also been long in the making, and after passage of the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act, there has been a steady rise in extra-party organizational power (Skocpol and Hertel-Fernandez 2016; Bawn et al. 2012). While Trump may be challenging American institutions and norms in new and dangerous ways, the democratic problems that preceded him will also outlast him. Comparative politics has the potential to explain the causes, consequences, and potential paths forward from these problems.

Comparative Approaches (II): America as a Comparative Case

The second approach to integrating the subfields is to use a standard one in comparative politics: ask why, if, or how certain conditions produce certain outcomes. Theories in comparative politics explore the relationships between structure, institutions, and agency; between organized groups and elected officials; between domestic and international actors. They uncover patterns common across time and across countries, particularly about processes of political change. Whereas the first approach tells us where America stands relative to similar countries, this approach tells us why.

A comparative approach shifts the framework for evaluating American democracy away from a model of classification—of whether or not America is becoming less democratic—and instead asks how processes of democratization play out in the American context. This allows us to disaggregate the totalizing concept of “democracy” into constituent dimensions that matter for different outcomes. Dahl (1971), for example, defined polyarchy along dimensions of participation and contestation; variation in these dimensions is expected, although too little participation or contestation has deleterious consequences. Lijphart’s (1999) pluralist and consociational models of democratic institutions generated predictions about accommodation of social conflict. The democratic problems in the United States can be examined over time; their causes and consequences may very well be explained in terms of broader patterns and relationships.

Democracy is, after all, riddled with tensions. Democratic states enshrine principles of fairness and equality, but politics is, in Harold Lasswell's (1936) famous articulation, about "who gets what, when, how." Resources, opportunities, and incomes are distributed unequally. Nation-states must define citizenship, determine who has rights *vis-à-vis* the state, and choose how to protect those rights. And the power of the state, while mitigated by democratic accountability, is no less absolute in a democratic than an authoritarian context. Democracies repress and kill their citizens; political leaders can enforce the law in discretionary and arbitrary ways. Some level of competitive authoritarianism may simply be a "persistent equilibrium outcome" (Haggard and Kaufman 2016).

I now describe three areas critical to understanding the quality of American democracy, and show the advantages of a comparative approach. The literature on clientelism and corruption is helpful in thinking through unequal political representation in the United States. Second, literature on redistribution and capitalism shows us how other states mitigate economic inequality and constrain markets. Third, the tradition of American Political Development (APD) and race and ethnic politics can help rethink and reframe our understanding of baseline levels of democracy in the United States. All three of these literatures are extensive, and my purpose here is to show how we might use their conceptual tools and framings to think about American politics, rather than to provide an exhaustive discussion of these literatures in themselves.

Clientelism and Corruption

One of the foremost problems in democracies has to do with the use and abuse of political power. Clientelism and corruption are endemic in the developing world, where politicians use their offices to provide jobs or material rewards to voters, or to engage in rent-seeking at public expense. While this kind of outright corruption is far less common in advanced democracies, citizens nonetheless feel that institutions are rigged and that politicians care little about the interests of most voters. In what ways might the quality of democracy suffer when some interests are systematically privileged over others, or when elected officials use their offices for personal or material advantage?

The United States is a rare example of a country that has overcome, or outgrown, many of its problems with patronage and political corruption. The Jacksonian spoils system, instituted in 1828, led to widespread vote-buying and a civil service staffed almost entirely by patronage appointments. These appointees provided volunteers and financing for political parties; the nineteenth-century United States is "one long lesson in the use of public funds and public office to build party organization" (Huntington 1968, 70; Shefter 1977). By the twentieth century, however, parties became programmatic: they

adopted a meritocratic civil service, linkages with organized interests, and policy agendas. They also expanded the administrative capacities of the state, shifting from distributive to broader public policies (Kuo 2018; Skowronek 1982; Silberman 1993). Of course, corruption and patronage are impossible to eradicate completely, and continued to enjoy a long tradition in urban areas dominated by political machines (Scott 1969; Banfield and Wilson 1963).

Today, politics is largely "clean": politicians do not hand out cash on election day, nor can you expect a public sector job from your local member of Congress. Clientelism is defined as "the distribution of material rewards in exchange for electoral support," and typically refers to the proffering of cash, food, alcohol, or employment at the ballot-box: using this definition, clientelism is not a routine part of American democracy (Stokes et al. 2013). Elections, however, are not the only important aspect of democracy. Donors, lobbyists, and organized interests compete with voters for politicians' attention and policies.

Is there clientelism in American democracy? We might re-ask this as: do policies reflect the interests and preferences of constituents and voters? Research on American policymaking increasingly shows that the answer is no. Inequality and political polarization have risen in tandem since the 1970s. Campaign finance expenditures have also gone up, and the McCain-Feingold reforms placed limits on what parties could collect and spend on election campaigns. There has been a proliferation in financing arrangements, including PACs, 501(c)(4)s, and SuperPACs. These groups are separate from professional lobbying associations, which have also dramatically expanded their presence in Washington DC. According to Lee Drutman (2015), there are some 14,000 lobbying organizations in the nation's capital; its top tier is composed almost exclusively of business and corporate interests who wield disproportionate access to lawmakers and influence over the policy agenda.

Lobbyists are effective at blocking items from the Congressional agenda and securing rule changes in administrative agencies (Baumgartner et al. 2009). Congressional and bureaucratic capacity is limited—the number of bureaucrats today is the same as it was in the 1970s—while the number of lobbyists and the cost of elections has mushroomed (DiIulio 2014). As the parties moved closer together on economic policy in the 1980s and 1990s, they privileged neoliberal policies: lower trade barriers, retrenchment of welfare policy, and deregulation across many industries, particularly finance and commercial banking. In doing so, they exacerbated growing gaps in American incomes, wealth, savings rates, and mobility (Piketty 2014; Bartels 2008; Keller and Kelly 2015).

Gilens and Page refer to this trend, whereby economic policy reflects the material interests of economic elites, as

oligarchy; Hacker and Pierson call it plutocracy. But unequal participation in American politics in general—the affluent are much more likely to vote, and the disparities simply rise with more onerous political involvement—begs the question of whether systemic clientelism qualifies as an undemocratic form of democratic accountability. A comparative approach helps us understand what happens in democracies when policies systematically benefit one segment of society versus others, or when political and economic inequality are fused.

Beyond the political inequities in American politics, we are now in the somewhat unprecedented situation of a president who has personal business interests that are averse to, or at least in tension with, the interests of the American public. The concept of corruption is multidimensional and vague, involving an abuse of public office for private gain (Rose-Ackerman 1999). It ranges from flagrant violation of laws to occasional violations of norms, some subversion of the public interest. Few conflict of interest laws govern the executive branch. But to allow the pursuit of financial and private interests is discomfiting, at best. How can we think about this form of corruption, when it is not in fact corrupt in a legal sense?²

The Trump organization builds property, or sells its name to properties, in countries around the world. Further, the president uses the legal arm of the state to enforce laws in highly discretionary ways, in line with his personal interests. He has threatened to levy additional postal fees on Amazon to punish *The Washington Post*, which is owned by Jeff Bezos, and delayed the AT&T-Time Warner Merger because of opposition to CNN, which is owned by Time-Warner.³ He is now directing the nation's enforcement agency to investigate a special prosecutor's investigation into Russian foreign meddling. Meanwhile, his family's business interests continue to benefit from their political ties. Organizations and foreign governments stay at Trump properties, as does the president himself (on the taxpayers' dime); Jared Kushner's sister used Trump in marketing visas to investors in China; Trump's former lawyer, Michael Cohen, received payments from corporations and foreign governments. There are ongoing investigations into the administration's campaign finance violations and fraudulent activities. As Julia Azari (2018) has written, these actions constitute not only a breach of political norms, but also of democratic values; nonetheless, the executive is given wide latitude to determine how and when to enforce the law.

While the question of whether Trump's norms violations constitute a crime is ultimately up to the other branches of government (and voters) to determine, we can at least theorize about what this kind of governing entails. There are many states, for example, that fuse state and economic interests. Gerschenkron famously noted that few states would be able to industrialize the way Britain and the

United States did, with little state intervention. Instead, states would need to be heavily involved in the industrialization process, as they were during waves of import-substitution industrialization and export-oriented industrialization in the nineteen-seventies and eighties. Today, countries like South Korea and Brazil are showing us how corrupt ties between business and industry are fully compatible with liberal democracy and strong state institutions. The powerful *chaebols* in South Korea, where Samsung alone constitutes 20% of GDP, have long thrived on family ownership and political ties. Brazil's Petrobras scandal included corrupt ties to two former presidents, many other politicians, and corporate executives. The United States may not have state-owned enterprises or large family conglomerates, but the experience of other countries provide us with ways to understand how the convergence of economic and political interests in the form of specific family companies creates endemic corruption that is difficult to eradicate without rigorous oversight.

Democracy, Redistribution, and Capitalism

The relationship between capitalism and democracy is complex; it is one of mutual benefit, subject to constant renegotiation and tension. The history of the advanced democracies is inextricably intertwined with that of capitalism, with the two institutions developing alongside each other dating to the industrial revolution. In capitalist democracies, there exist explicit and implicit social contracts between citizens, elected officials, bureaucrats, producers, laborers, and consumers, with relationships of accountability that are both straightforward and muddled. Traditionally, democratic institutions provide regulation of the market, protection of workers and consumers, and political stability and rule of law necessary for markets to succeed. In turn, capitalism provides private sector employment, goods and services, and economic growth.

This relationship—of capitalism and democracy, both in the United States and elsewhere—varies over time, with significant political consequences. Much of the discontent with representative institutions or failures of policy may be related to changes in the configuration of capital. Comparative work in this area can build on the robust literature on the welfare state and social policy that has long been interested in why there is less appetite for redistribution in the United States. The American case can improve our comparative theories about the state and social policy, theories that in turn can be used to understand a fuller range of political outcomes.

More integration of comparative and American work can also help us understand the impact of changes in capitalism, particularly of neoliberalism, on the quality of democracy. The end of the Cold War produced

triumphalism about liberalization of political and economic institutions that has now given way to real concern. Capitalist gains have been highly unequal. Economic growth has lifted billions out of poverty worldwide, while wages and opportunities for many low- and middle-income workers in wealthy nations have stagnated or declined (Scheve and Stasavage 2017). Meanwhile, incomes at the very top of the global income distribution have risen exponentially (Milanovic 2016). The concentration of wealth has many causes—in addition to globalization, asset mobility is high, allowing greater offshoring of capital, and corporate tax rates have declined. All of these present challenges for advanced industrial democracies that once succeeded in harnessing capitalism's benefits while mitigating its negative economic and social effects.

Comparative Social Policy and the American Welfare State

Comparative political economy has long examined the reasons that the United States has greater inequality and a less robust welfare state than other countries. Distributive conflict “lies at the heart of politics” (Golden and Min 2013), and capitalist democracies work to mitigate the unequal distribution of wealth and resources. The United States' high levels of inequality and poverty, combined with relatively lower levels of unionization and income transfers, have received a great deal of scholarly attention. Esping-Anderson (1990) described the United States as an example of a liberal, as opposed to conservative or social democratic, welfare state; Hall and Soskice (2001) use it as an example of a liberal, as opposed to coordinated, market economy, in their work on varieties of capitalism. In this literature, the factors that explain why welfare and redistributive outcomes look so different in the United States include federalism, majoritarian electoral systems, large numbers of veto players, pluralist versus corporatist arrangements, coordination between firms, low working-class consciousness or class conflict, and the ever-vague notion of political culture (Linz and Stepan 2011; Martin and Swank 2012; Iversen and Soskice 2009; Lynch 2006; Amberg 2017).

The common refrain that the American welfare state is weaker than those in other countries has been challenged by scholarship showing the expansiveness of American social policy. Public policies are often carried out in ways hidden from the public—through tax expenditures, for example, or through state and local governments, non-profit organizations, and the private sector (Mettler 2011; Howard 2007). This creates a “government-citizen disconnect,” according to Mettler (2018): not only are many citizens unaware of the benefits they receive, but those who support expansion of federal programs are also less likely to participate in politics than those who oppose it. Efforts to delegitimize and shrink the state succeed largely

because many citizens are unaware of how government works on their behalf.

Further, the highly delegated nature of the American bureaucracy creates opportunities for capture by well-organized and entrenched interests. These groups seek expansion of the state—for example, greater regulation of occupational licensing, or more robust intellectual property protections—that generate rents and distort markets. The United States federal government is not weak because it is limited, but instead because it is expansive in ways poorly understood by the public, and difficult to change through organized opposition (Lindsey and Teles 2017). Using a comparative lens to understand this relationship of state and society has the potential to “ground a transformation in our understanding of comparative political economy” (Prasad 2016, 201; Lynch 2014; Novak 2008). Comparative research can explore the way politicians publicize and politicize social goods, and how they claim credit. It might also examine how states effectively “rent-proof” administrative agencies, or correct information asymmetries between industry and government.

In addition to better conceptualization of welfare states and policy, there is fertile ground for comparing the delegated American policy apparatus to that of developing countries. Since the 1970s, the rise of New Public Management led many international institutions to promote delegation to, or partnerships with, the private sector in policymaking and implementation. Not only does this create problems of accountability, but it also rests on untested assumptions that principles of corporate governance can and should be applied to democratic administration of public services. Research in this area could examine the causes and consequences of delegated and privatized policymaking, helping us understand the relationship of policy implementation and public opinion on provision of public goods, for example, or of thorny issues related to procurement and bidding for government contracts.

The Challenges of Twenty-First Century Democratic Capitalism

Beyond redistribution and welfare, much more work needs to be done to think about challenges to democracy given changes in the form and scale of twenty-first century capitalism. In Galbraith's (1952) formulation, capitalism and democracy require “countervailing power” between big business, big government, and big labor. The history of capitalism and democracy is one of layers of accountability, with capitalists answering to regulatory agencies and lawmakers, as well as to consumers and workers. In comparison to research on welfare states and redistribution, however, political science has much less to say about capitalism and democracy. To be clear, there is a great deal of comparative work on *economic development* and democracy that examines how factors such as

inequality and industrialization affect democratic transition and economic growth.

But capitalism itself requires closer investigation. Firms have changed over time, and owners of capital—including shareholders—have gained power relative to consumers and workers. Capitalism produces outcomes beyond inequality, all of which pose problems for democracies. Problems of monopoly, of credit and lending (financialization), and of automation and technology affect consumer welfare and labor markets. Through processes of consultation with aggrieved groups and responsiveness to public pressure, democracy has been able to respond to these problems. However, democracy may not be able to constrain capital in the same ways today given the rise of global, highly mobile capital, of new financial instruments, and of large multinational corporations (Crouch 2013; Streeck 2014; Krippner 2011; Block 2014). In comparative and American politics, business influence is taken as a given: business occupies a “privileged position;” elected officials are “structurally dependent” on capitalists (Lindblom 1977; Przeworski and Wallerstein 1988). There is not much investigation of variation in business preferences over time, or the conditions under which business does or does not achieve its policy goals (Hart 2004; Vogel 1987; Culpepper 2015).

A comparative investigation into capitalism and democracy might ask how capitalists—as political actors—have shaped support and opposition for democracy and reform. There is variation in the preferences and power of capital over time. Businesses sometimes provide critical support to opposition parties in single-party regimes (Arriola 2012), or work with parties to build robust distributive institutions (Schoenman 2015), but can also capture the state (Hellman 1998). Business has been critical in cross-class alliances promoting social insurance, both in the United States and Western Europe; business also pushed for programmatic reforms from the clientelistic parties of nineteenth-century Britain and the United States (Swenson 2002; Mares 2003; Kuo 2018). Mizruchi (2013) has shown that unity among business executives in the postwar period led to business support for regulation, infrastructure, and expansion of public goods. These were periods when business values aligned with those of the public, and when business turned to the state for protection from market uncertainty. Contemporary politics looks different: business influence in politics has accelerated a proliferation in right-to-work laws, a decline in union membership, and deregulation.

In a recent review of books on the Trump administration’s assault on democracy, Purdy (2018) wrote that “answering basic questions about the relationship between democracy and capitalism is the only credible response to this crisis.” Sociologists have noted the myriad ways democratic citizenship is inextricably tied to one’s role in the market. Financialization of capital has led to more

consumer indebtedness, as access to easy credit allows predatory loans in markets for housing and higher education, among others. Savings are largely invested not only in stocks, but in financial products that carry a great deal of risk—see, for example, the financial crisis of 2008. Financial capital also generates unsustainable levels of inequality (Piketty 2014). These are international trends with significant domestic consequences, and therefore ripe for comparative theorizing about the way changes to capitalism affect democratic outcomes. At the very least, we know that labor market precariousness, wages, and opportunities could affect both support for democracy and the ability of states to improve the material well-being of citizens.

The rise in populism is a global one, not an American one. Across the West, far-right and populist parties have made similar claims about the convergence of economic and political elites’ interests (Eichengreen 2018; Kuttner 2018). Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump, like many other populist leaders, railed again the rigged system at the heart of American politics. While they articulated different causes, they both agreed that leaders of the Republican and Democratic parties had capitulated to Wall Street, sacrificing the needs of average citizens. The failure of democratic institutions to blunt the effects of capitalism have uncomfortable associations with the interwar period in the early twentieth century, and require us to think about how democracy—bound as it is by sovereignty, nation-states, and discontented publics—might provide solutions to crises of twenty-first century capitalism.

American Political Development and Race and Ethnic Politics

A final way to assess the quality of American democracy is to step back and consider whether or not America has ever been democratic. The long history of its formal democratic institutions obscures its equally long history of racial stratification and “subnational authoritarianism” (Gibson 2012; Mickey 2015; Kalb and Kuo 2018). Comparative politics can learn from scholarship in American Political Development (APD) and race and ethnic politics, both of which are attentive to episodes of non-democracy and the difficult process of institutional reform. This literature points to the ongoing inability of minority groups—particularly “race-class subjugated” communities—to fully and meaningfully participate in economic and political life. It asks how leaders have wielded the power of the state, historically and today, to exclude and repress citizens (Soss and Weaver 2017; Marx 1988).

An important lesson from recent work in comparative politics is that the process of democratization is not linear or unidirectional (Ziblatt and Capoccia 2010). Modernization theory, with its grand theories and sanguine insistence that democratic transition will inevitably produce democratic consolidation, cannot explain why so

many countries have become stuck in hybrid modes of governance (Levitsky and Way 2010). The literature on hybrid regimes examines how leaders mix democratic and authoritarian practices, and in the United States, democratic progress has almost always occurred at the exclusion of black Americans. The end of Reconstruction after the Civil War led to Jim Crow laws. The reconfiguration of state and society after the New Deal, particularly social security, capitulated to Southern Democratic demands that domestic servants and farm laborers—labor performed by African Americans—be excluded from its protections (Katznelson 2013; Valelly 2004).

One way America is exceptional is in its status as a former settler colony and plantation slaveholding society (Pepinsky 2018; Hartz 1964). The United States combines European political institutions with a racial hierarchy that has persisted through centuries of democratization and development. The rise of subnational authoritarianism occurred as a slaveowning society was being violently reintegrated into a democratic country. In *Deep Roots*, Acharya, Blackwell, and Sen (2018) find that slaveholding in the Southern United States impacts contemporary outcomes. For example, areas with higher levels of slaveholding are associated with more conservative politics and racism today. The twin forces of intergenerational socialization and institutionalized racism allowed for the persistence of racial hierarchies over time. This dovetails with findings on the impact of slaveholding on African underdevelopment (Nunn and Wantchekon 2011). Future research examining the divergent political trajectory of the labor-intensive, repressive, agricultural American South can use theories from comparative work on landholding inequality and democracy, which predict both underdevelopment and authoritarianism (Ziblatt 2008; Acemoglu and Robinson 2009).

The racial divisions in the United States are in full view today, producing debates about the way Americanists can and should discuss racial hierarchy and democracy. Eckhouse (2018), for example, argues for making ethno-racial politics a central question in American politics, using comparative theories about institutional legitimacy. A comparative historical perspective could go a step further by integrating the United States into comparative work on slavery, state-building, and democratic reform and roll-back.

A comparative perspective also allows us to ask how racial hierarchies are maintained, particularly in the face of disadvantageous demographic trends. In ethnically divided societies, competition over resources can incentivize politicians to mobilize on the basis of ethnicity (Posner 2005). The election of Donald Trump led to an ongoing debate over whether or not Trump voters represent white racial backlash, or economic anxiety and status threat (Mutz 2018; Rothwell and Diego-Rosell 2017). In the face of rising inequality and stagnant wages,

it should not be surprising that a group facing competition—whether real or perceived—would try to consolidate access to power and resources. Populist leaders that have gained popularity across Western democracies capitalize on sentiments underlying tension in society, rather than creating them anew. King and Smith's (2005) description of "racialized orders" of the United States, showing ebbs and flows between white supremacy and egalitarianism, can be usefully applied today.

There are many other episodes of non-democracy in American history that would be useful to compare. In "The Trump Presidency and American Democracy," Lieberman et al. (2018) enumerate a few: the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II; Watergate; the McCarthy investigations; the FBI's counterintelligence program (COINTELPRO). These episodes are non-democratic in different ways: some involve abuse of state surveillance power, while others involve the suspension or erosion of constitutional protections. Some were resolved through interbranch conflict, such as Watergate, and others through public pressure, such as McCarthyism. In all of these cases, democratic institutions were resilient in the face of forces that would undermine them. Marginalized and excluded groups have also been crucial to the political development of the American state itself, as they placed demands on the state in critical periods and created new avenues of political participation (Johnson 2010; Thurston 2018; Francis 2014). Comparative work can better examine the expansion of participatory and representative institutions during the process of political development.

Conclusion

American democracy is an unfulfilled promise, an ongoing project; it is worthy of our attention not as a set of stable institutions that is now under threat, but rather as a process alternating between progress and retreat. The many questions political scientists are asking right now about this political moment must be accompanied by an acknowledgment of how uncertain many aspects of democracy can be. Political science often focuses on observable outcomes and formal institutions, such as levels of political participation, the configuration of governing institutions, and election procedures and results. This work can be more explicitly linked to questions about the quality of democracy, by examining, for example, the way representative institutions are weakened (through intent or through neglect), the way parties structure and mediate interests, or the way courts act as bulwarks against or enablers of concentrated power.

Now more than ever, we also need to examine variables that are hard to operationalize and measure, such as norms, inclusion, civility, and legitimacy—all of which have important, fundamental impacts on democracy (Soss and Weaver 2017). The formal institutions of American democracy are not being dismantled, at least according to

political scientists who are keeping a watchful eye (Bright Line Watch; Drutman, Diamond, and Goldman 2018). However, the social and political environment in which institutions are embedded and the discretionary power wielded by state officials can do real and lasting harm. Empirically, we need to know how the erosion of norms translates into attacks on democracy itself, or how changing attitudes towards democracy translates into the election of illiberal candidates. Weighing in on the experiences of other countries is a good first step, and satisfies a growing public and journalistic demand for contextualization. However, there is more we can do to understand long-run trajectories of American democratic dysfunction. Comparative analysis is particularly useful to determine how “many of the advanced democracies, when faced with crises of the magnitude that the United States now confronts, were able to reimagine, and reconfigure, many of their basic institutions and to deepen democracy” (Linz and Stepan 2011, 853).

There are reasons to believe that America will survive the particular challenges borne of the Trump presidency. But many of the problems that preceded and produced him will also outlast him. Comparative analysis can be a useful tool to understand pathways out of democratic decline, and to help us, as scholars, to engage in productive discussions of how best to achieve the ideals and visions of our democracy in practice.

Notes

- 1 For recent exceptions, see Bateman 2018, Jusko 2017, Kuo 2018, and Teele 2018.
- 2 These issues are distinct from the way Cabinet secretaries have spent public money while in office. Tom Price, Scott Pruitt, Ben Carson, Ryan Zinke, and former VA Secretary David Shulkin have all been found spending untoward sums of public money on travel, personal security details, and office redecoration. These issues are further distinct from the Trump administration’s ongoing scandals concerning fraud and illegal use of campaign funds.
- 3 See, e.g. Mullainathan 2018.

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