



# A REPUBLIC, If We Can Keep It

## *Comparing America*

**Didi Kuo (Stanford University)**

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## Comparing America: Reflections on Democracy Across Subfields

Didi Kuo<sup>1</sup>

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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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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 more decimated, its state more captured. What is striking about this is that we have the conceptual and analytical tools to understand *all* of these problems as comparativists – and to do so with greater breadth. 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, predation, and discretionary policy implementation? How do institutions mitigate conflict in divided societies? Scholars of comparative politics have asked these questions for generations. It is time for them to think about how to apply these to the United States.

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<sup>1</sup> [jdkuo@stanford.edu](mailto:jdkuo@stanford.edu), Stanford Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law. Thanks to participants of the Cornell Center for the Study of Inequality and New America conference, “A Republic, If We Can Keep It,” April 2018. I am grateful for helpful feedback from Katherine Bersch, Kharis Templeman, Lee Drutman, Stephen Stedman, Tom Pepinsky, and Nolan McCarty, and research assistance from Whitney McIntosh.

Rather than asking whether or not the United States is now at risk of non-democracy, a comparative perspective helps us understand the many ways the United States deviates from our assumptions and expectations of how democracy should operate. By beginning from the premise that all democracies are imperfect, 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. Further, a comparative lens shows us that many “undemocratic” outcomes in the United States are precisely what we should expect to see, given predictions of comparative theories of democracy.

This essay begins 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. It then articulates 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 reign 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 and others have noted, we are living in a period of democratic retreat around the world.<sup>5</sup>

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. What created these challenges, and what can solve them? 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.<sup>6</sup>

In calling for a more rigorous integration of the fields of comparative and American politics, this article links 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.<sup>7</sup> As Linz and Stepan 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.”<sup>8</sup> 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 found that only about 7% of articles published in the journal between 1986-2011 were comparative.<sup>9</sup> Morgan further showed that *Politics and History* and *The Journal of Policy History* are dominated by APD, while *Comparative Political Studies* published fewer than 4% of articles that included the United States between 1968-2014.<sup>10</sup> 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 and/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 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.”<sup>11</sup> 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”<sup>12</sup> allows sophisticated examination of narrow and technical aspects of American politics that make it seem highly incomparable. 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.<sup>13</sup> 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. King and Lieberman, in an *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—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.”<sup>14</sup> 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 21<sup>st</sup> place.<sup>15</sup> 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.”<sup>16</sup> 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 28 Western democracies), but also of the fifty states within the United States.<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup> 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 our imperfect polity. It can also help us think about processes and trajectories of democracy and development, highlighting just how fragile or contingent various aspects of democracy are. Beyond merely explaining where the United States is situated compared to other countries, this approach demonstrates that the feelings of unease about democratic stability in the United States are warranted. 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 in to 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.<sup>19</sup> 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 norms and practices that are easily eroded.<sup>20</sup>

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.<sup>21</sup> 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.”<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup> 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.

Further, a comparative approach allows us to get away from binary discussions of whether America is or is not a democracy, which is ultimately a subjective and somewhat unproductive enterprise. Instead, it allows us to disaggregate the totalizing concept of “democracy” into constituent dimensions that matter for different outcomes. Dahl, 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 pluralist and consociational models of democratic institutions generated predictions about accommodation of social conflict. These examples show that what many scholars consider constants in the United States should instead be considered variables.<sup>24</sup> American democracy is not exceptional because of the nature of its democratic problems. Instead, these are problems that can be examined over time; their causes and consequences may very well be explained in terms of broader patterns and relationships.

American democracy has long been imperfect, and we therefore need to be systematic in the way we approach our research questions. Democracy is, after all, riddled with tensions. Democratic states enshrine principles of fairness and equality, but politics is, in Harold Lasswell’s famous articulation, about “who gets what, when, how.”<sup>25</sup> 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. The question of whether the United States is backsliding or not relies on an approach of regime classification that ignores the fact that some level of competitive authoritarianism may simply be a “persistent equilibrium outcome.”<sup>26</sup>

I now describe three areas in which comparative and American scholars might fruitfully understand elements of contemporary American politics. The literature on clientelism and corruption is helpful in contextualizing some of the unequal political representation in the United States. Second, literature on capitalism and redistribution is instructive in showing how other states mitigate economic inequality or constrain markets. Third, using the tradition of American Political Development (APD) and race and ethnic politics can help rethink and reframe our

understanding of the baseline 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 democratizing contexts; politicians use their offices to provide jobs or material rewards to voters, or engage in rent-seeking at public expense. Democratization creates opportunities for patronage, as preexisting social hierarchies became “effective channels for the delivery of votes from the newly enfranchised lower classes.”<sup>27</sup> Over time, as predicted by modernization theorists and scholars of democratic transition and consolidation, democracy provides ways for corruption to decline: voters may develop preferences against clientelism and patronage as incomes rise; they may demand cleaner politics and transparency in the allocation of resources.<sup>28</sup>

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.”<sup>29</sup> 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.<sup>30</sup> Of course, corruption and patronage are impossible to eradicate completely, and continued to enjoy a long tradition in urban areas dominated by political machines.<sup>31</sup>

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.<sup>32</sup> 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, 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.<sup>33</sup>

While there is little evidence of *quid pro quo* corruption, lobbyists are effective at blocking items from the Congressional agenda or securing rule changes in administrative agencies.<sup>34</sup> Congressional and bureaucratic capacity is limited – the number of bureaucrats today is the same as it was in the 1970s<sup>35</sup> – while the number of lobbyists and the cost of elections has mushroomed. As the parties moved closer together on economic policy in the nineteen-eighties and nineties, 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.<sup>36</sup>

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 given 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 – it begs the question of whether systemic clientelism qualifies as an undemocratic form of democratic accountability.

Beyond the political and 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.<sup>37</sup> It ranges from flagrant violation of laws to occasional violations of norms, some subversion of public interest. Trump may not be corrupt in that he has not violated non-existent conflict-of-interest laws governing 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?<sup>38</sup>

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*,<sup>39</sup> 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. 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);<sup>40</sup> Jared Kushner's sister used Trump in marketing visas to investors in China;<sup>41</sup> Trump's former lawyer, Michael Cohen, received payments from corporations and foreign governments. As Julia Azari 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.<sup>42</sup>

While the question of whether Trump's norms violations constitute a crime is ultimately up 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 power of *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.<sup>43</sup>

### **Capitalism, Democracy, and Redistribution**

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.

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.<sup>44</sup> Meanwhile, incomes at the very top of the global income distribution have risen exponentially.<sup>45</sup> 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 political economy can shed light on 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,”<sup>46</sup> and capitalist democracies work to mitigate the unequal distribution of wealth and resources. The United States has long been included in analyses of welfare states and redistribution, particularly given its higher levels of inequality and poverty, and its lower levels of unionization and income transfers. Esping-Anderson described the United States as an example of a liberal, as opposed to conservative or social democratic, welfare state; Hall and Soskice use it as an example of a liberal, as opposed to coordinated, market economy, in their work on varieties of capitalism.<sup>47</sup> 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 number of veto players, pluralist and corporatist arrangements, coordination between firms, low working-class consciousness or class conflict, and the ever-vague notion of political culture.<sup>48</sup>

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.<sup>49</sup> Rather than framing these attributes as ways that the United States is exceptional, Prasad argues that research on the American welfare state “could, indeed, ground a transformation in our understanding of comparative political economy.”<sup>50</sup> Lynch, for example, focuses on elements of welfare states comparable across national contexts, including eligibility criteria, recipients’ age, and the actors and institutions that created welfare states, finding that the United States could mitigate social risk by focusing on new areas of social policy targeting children, health, and education.<sup>51</sup> In addition to better conceptualization of welfare states and policy, there is fertile ground for comparing the delegated American policy apparatus to developing contexts. 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. This creates problems of accountability, of course, and rests on untested assumptions that principles of corporate governance can and should be applied to democratic administration of public services.

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 formulation, capitalism and democracy require “countervailing power” between big business, big government, and big labor.<sup>52</sup> 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 landholding or income inequality 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.<sup>53</sup> In comparative and American politics, business influence is taken as a given: business occupies a “privileged position;” elected officials are “structurally dependent” on capitalists.<sup>54</sup> 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.<sup>55</sup>

A comparative investigation into capitalism and democracy might ask how capitalists—as political actors—have shaped periods of democratic reform. Business has been crucial in cross-class alliances promoting social insurance, both in the United States and Western Europe; business also demanded programmatic reforms from the clientelistic parties of nineteenth-century Britain and the United States.<sup>56</sup> Mizruchi has shown that unity among business executives in the postwar period led to business support for regulation, infrastructure, and expansion of public goods.<sup>57</sup> These examples show us periods when business values were 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 wrote that "answering basic questions about the relationship between democracy and capitalism is the only credible response to this crisis."<sup>58</sup> 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.<sup>59</sup>

Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump, like many other populist leaders, railed against 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. Across the West, far-right parties have made similar claims about the convergence of economic and political elites' interests. 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/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."<sup>60</sup> 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<sup>61</sup> – 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.<sup>62</sup>

An important lesson from recent work in comparative politics is that the process of democratization is not linear or unidirectional.<sup>63</sup> 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.<sup>64</sup> 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.<sup>65</sup>

As Pepinsky recently argued, one way America is exceptional is in its status as a former settler colony and plantation slaveholding society.<sup>66</sup> The United States combines European political institutions with a racial hierarchy that has persisted through centuries of democratization and development. The development of subnational authoritarianism occurred as a slaveowning society was being violently reintegrated into a democratic country. In *Deep Roots*, by Acharya, Blackwell, and Sen, the authors find an ongoing impact of slaveholding in the Southern United States.<sup>67</sup> 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 is what we would expect to find, given findings on the impact of slaveholding on African underdevelopment, for example.<sup>68</sup> Further, given that the South relied on labor-intensive agriculture, comparative work on landholding inequality and democracy—not to mention modernization theory itself—predicts underdevelopment and authoritarianism.<sup>69</sup>

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, for example, argues for making ethnoracial politics a central question in American politics, using comparative theories about institutional legitimacy.<sup>70</sup> 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 rollback.

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.<sup>71</sup> 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.<sup>72</sup> 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 Rogers’ description of “racialized orders” of the United States, showing ebbs and flows between white supremacy and egalitarianism, can be usefully applied today.<sup>73</sup>

There are many other episodes of non-democracy in American history that would be useful to compare. In “Trumpism and American Democracy,” Lieberman et al. enumerate a few: the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II; Watergate; the McCarthy investigations; the FBI’s counterintelligence program (COINTELPRO).<sup>74</sup> 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.<sup>75</sup> This area is ripe for a comparative understanding, as the political development of other countries has also been informed by the accommodation of disadvantaged groups.

### *Conclusion*

American democracy is an unfulfilled promise, an ongoing project; 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. Now more than ever, we 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.<sup>76</sup>

The formal institutions of democracy are not being dismantled, at least according to political scientists who are keeping a watchful eye.<sup>77</sup> 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. Weighing on the experiences of other countries satisfies a growing public and journalistic demand for contextualization. However, there is more we can do 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.”<sup>78</sup>

There are many reasons to believe 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.

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- <sup>1</sup> Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Albertus and Menaldo 2018; Mounk 2018; Mettler et al. 2017
- <sup>2</sup> Gilens and Page 2014; Page, Bartels, and Seawright 2013; Bartels 2010; Hacker and Pierson 2011; Gilens 2010
- <sup>3</sup> Mason 2018; Mason 2015; Iyengar and Westwood 2015; Iyengar and Krupenkin 2018
- <sup>4</sup> Mettler 2011; di Iulio 2014; Drutman 2015. Campbell and Morgan 2011; Michener 2018
- <sup>5</sup> Diamond 2015
- <sup>6</sup> See, e.g., Flaherty 2017; Linz and Stepan 2011; King and Lieberman 2009
- <sup>7</sup> Morgan 2014.
- <sup>8</sup> Linz and Stepan 2011, p. 842
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>10</sup> Morgan 2014.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>12</sup> Soss and Weaver 2017
- <sup>13</sup> Gerschenkron 1962; Prasad 2016; Haggard and Kaufman 2016
- <sup>14</sup> King and Lieberman 2009, p. 549
- <sup>15</sup> Economist Intelligence Unit
- <sup>16</sup> Freedom House
- <sup>17</sup> Electoral Integrity Project
- <sup>18</sup> Linz and Stepan 2011, p. 841
- <sup>19</sup> Snyder 2017; Albright 2018
- <sup>20</sup> Helmke and Levitsky 2004
- <sup>21</sup> McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2016; Hacker and Pierson 2011.
- <sup>22</sup> Suskind 2004
- <sup>23</sup> Skocpol and Hertel-Fernandez 2016; Hertel-Fernandez, Skocpol, and Sclar 2018; Bawn et al. 2012
- <sup>24</sup> I thank Tom Pepinsky for this framing.
- <sup>25</sup> Lasswell 1936
- <sup>26</sup> Haggard and Kaufman 2016
- <sup>27</sup> Chubb 1982, p.4
- <sup>28</sup> Stokes, Dunning, Nazareno and Brusco 2013, Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007
- <sup>29</sup> Huntington 1968, p. 70; Shefter 1977
- <sup>30</sup> Kuo 2018; Skowronek 1982; Silberman 1993
- <sup>31</sup> Scott 1969; Banfield and Wilson 1963
- <sup>32</sup> Stokes et al. 2013
- <sup>33</sup> Drutman 2015
- <sup>34</sup> Beth Leech, Frank Baumgartner, Jeffrey Berry, Marie Hojnacki, and David Kimball 2009.
- <sup>35</sup> diIulio 2014
- <sup>36</sup> Piketty 2014; Bartels 2008
- <sup>37</sup> Rose-Ackerman 1999
- <sup>38</sup> These issues are distinct from the way Cabinet secretaries have spent public money while in office. Tom Price, the former Secretary of Health and Human Services, was fired for chartering private jets for official government travel. 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.
- <sup>39</sup> Mullainathan 2018.

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- <sup>40</sup> OpenSecrets.com <https://www.opensecrets.org/trump/trump-properties?cycle=All>
- <sup>41</sup> Hernandez, Li, and Drucker 2017
- <sup>42</sup> Azari 2018
- <sup>43</sup> Weyland 2017
- <sup>44</sup> Scheve and Stasavage 2017
- <sup>45</sup> Milanovic 2016
- <sup>46</sup> Golden and Min 2013
- <sup>47</sup> Esping-Anderson 1990; Hall and Soskice 2001
- <sup>48</sup> Linz and Stepan 2011, Martin and Swank 2012; Iversen and Soskice 2009
- <sup>49</sup> Mettler 2001; Howard 2007
- <sup>50</sup> Prasad 2016
- <sup>51</sup> Lynch 2014; Lynch 2006
- <sup>52</sup> Galbraith 1952
- <sup>53</sup> Crouch 2013; Streeck 2014; Krippner 2011; Block 2013
- <sup>54</sup> Lindblom 1977; Przeworski and Wallerstein 1988
- <sup>55</sup> Hart 2004; Vogel 1987; Culpepper 2015
- <sup>56</sup> Swenson 2002; Mares 2003; Kuo 2018.
- <sup>57</sup> Mizruchi 2013
- <sup>58</sup> Purdy 2018
- <sup>59</sup> Piketty 2015
- <sup>60</sup> Gibson 2012; Mickey 2015
- <sup>61</sup> Soss and Weaver 2017
- <sup>62</sup> Mickey 2015; Soss and Weaver 2017; Marx 1998
- <sup>63</sup> Ziblatt and Capoccia 2010
- <sup>64</sup> Levitsky and Way 2010
- <sup>65</sup> Katznelson 2013; Valelly 2004
- <sup>66</sup> Pepinsky 2018
- <sup>67</sup> Acharya, Blackwell, and Sen 2018
- <sup>68</sup> Nunn and Wantchekon 2011
- <sup>69</sup> Ziblatt 2008; Acemoglu and Robinson 2009
- <sup>70</sup> Eckhouse 2018; see also Kalb and Kuo 2018.
- <sup>71</sup> Posner 2005
- <sup>72</sup> Mutz 2018; Rothwell and Diego-Rosell 2017
- <sup>73</sup> King and Smith 2005
- <sup>74</sup> Mettler et al. 2017
- <sup>75</sup> Johnson 2010; Thurston 2018; Francis 2014
- <sup>76</sup> Soss and Weaver 2017
- <sup>77</sup> “A Republic, if We Can Keep It,” Bright Line Watch; Drutman, Diamond, and Goldman 2018
- <sup>78</sup> Linz and Stepan 2011, p. 853

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