THE STATE OF AMERICAN POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT IN HISTORY

Brian Rutledge

In a forthcoming historiographical essay about the Progressive Era, Robert Johnston calls American Political Development (APD) "arguably the most important strain of scholarship in American political history over the last quarter century." He then refers to several recent works by historians which draw on this strain in order to break new ground in investigating the American state and American politics. Two decades before Johnston's pronouncement, however, historians had yet to embrace APD so readily. In 1992, Ira Katznelson, an influential political scientist with roots in the world of history, wrote an essay exploring the growing importance of the then burgeoning sub-field in political science. He observed that APD sprang from the social sciences, not history. "The most interesting, certainly the most audacious, work on American political history is being written by participants in this scholarly program," he said, "most of whom are not members of history faculties."

Katznelson was referring to scholars like Stephen Skowronek, Theda Skocpol, and other social scientists, who, beginning in the early 1980s, set the standards for how to investigate America's political past. At the time he was writing, most historians had renounced political history for social history, just as many would later give up social history for cultural history, a field that still dominates the profession. Today, Johnston thinks of historians like William Novak and Brian Balogh as part of APD

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3Ibid, 721.
and several historians involved in producing APD scholarship believe that political history is alive and well.\(^4\)

In this essay, I explore the relationship of American Political Development to American political history. After briefly elaborating on why few historians investigated the evolution of American politics in the 1980s, I trace the growth of APD by looking at several of its key texts and the major contributions made by APD scholars to political history. Then, I investigate a few ways that political historians, beginning in the mid-1990s, have adopted the concepts and conclusions of APD. While historians have always contributed to and drawn on APD scholarship, there has been a marked increase in the strength of this “strain” of scholarship within the field of history between its birth in the early 1980s and today. The story of how APD emerged as a dominant strain in political history over the last quarter century is largely the story of how non-historians broke new ground in the study of politics while historians busied themselves with other subjects. As the tale unfolds though, more and more historians take their place next to other social scientists on stage. The most recent generation of historians have revisited the eclipsed study of politics by turning to cutting edge political science for inspiration and by successfully appropriating many aspects of APD. This is why, in 1992, Katznelson did not view historians as movers and shakers within APD, whereas today Johnston sees them as crucial to the field.

As this strain of scholarship surfaced in the 1980s, it remained little nurtured inside the discipline of history because many historians had lost faith in studying political structures. In 1986, the president of the Organization of American Historians, William Leuchtenburg, claimed that the status of the political historian within the profession had descended to “somewhere between a faith healer and a chiropractor.”\(^5\) Leuchtenburg pointed out that the Annales school and its emphasis on the longue durée had influenced the work of countless American historians in the 1960s, leaving less and less room for the study of individual political events. Then in the 1970s, social history had given historians microscopic vision, pushing them to investigate the intimate details of ordinary life. Many of these social historians devoted themselves to highlighting marginalized groups, like African Americans and women, and passed over national politics, which was perceived to be an arena dominated by elite white males. For those that stuck within the political


arena, the "new political history," which focused on statistical analysis and voting roll calls, did not prove viable. The trend failed to win new recruits and died off after the 1970s.

At the same time that these trends pulled historians from political history, America's shifting political climate pushed them from politics in general. In the 1970s, the nation suffered a massive mood swing as the optimistic post-war period of unprecedented economic growth turned into stagflation and depression. Americans shed their faith in government institutions after the quagmire in Vietnam and the lawbreaking president Nixon trampled on public life. As the New Left collapsed, a growing conservative movement reworked the Republican Party and, by the 1980s, barged into the White House. This New Right managed to quickly dismantle the New Deal liberal state and strip away government regulations in order to promote the free market fundamentalism articulated by economists from the University of Chicago. In this dreary context of defeat and disillusionment, many historians turned away from political activism and lost interest in investigating the troubled institutions of government.

Despite this retreat from politics, one trend in the historiography did remain influential through the 1980s which would prepare historians to later latch on to APD. Beginning in the 1960s and continuing through the 1980s, the Organizational Synthesis school of historians looked at how institutions developed over time and how they shaped society. To give an often cited example, in his 1967 book, The Search For Order, Robert Wiebe argued that during the Progressive Era Americans altered how they thought about organization in all spheres of life, economic, social, and otherwise. People increasingly valued centralization and more efficient ways of getting things done, which led to huge institutions, like national professional associations. While others had already studied bureaucracies, Wiebe and others from this school historicized American conceptions of bureaucracies and looked at how these new institutions defined the possibilities and limits of the era.

This school of thought influenced countless works in several areas within the field of history, especially political economy and business history. In 1986, James Livingston, for instance, built on the work of Wiebe in his book about Progressive Era economic debates, *Origins of the Federal Reserve System*. He argued that elites forged class-consciousness while pushing to reform the country's banking system between the 1890s and the 1910s. Instead of seeking short-term profit, they strove to redefine their place in the social world as modern, knowledgeable leaders who could tame unwieldy markets. While Wiebe had seen institutional development as a reaction to technological innovations, Livingston claimed that these businessmen were reacting to their low social standing, which left them overshadowed by the middle and working classes.

Livingston's book provides a good example of how the Organizational Synthesis pushed historians to explore the relationship between society and institutions. At the same time, it provides a look at political history before APD became fashionable in the discipline of history. Livingston described his book as an "attempt to integrate economic, social, and cultural history," in other words, as everything except political history despite the fact that he chronicled the formation of a significant government institution. To him, economics and class interests explained the Progressive Era. His work demonstrated the way that society and the state help constitute each other by showing that the modern ruling class in America came into existence in tandem with the development of federal banking. As businessmen pushed for reform, they developed a similar social identity and shared interests. At the same time, this group was "able to translate its particular view of the world into institutionalized political authority" by shaping the cultural parameters of debates about banking.

As we will see, *Origins of the Federal Reserve* might now be considered part of the APD literature because it explored the birth of a major state institution and linked social developments with state developments. But unlike the social scientists discussed below, Livingston has received minimal recognition as a pioneer of APD because authority within the field has been institutionalized in editorships and through footnotes. The founders of APD scholarship, like Stephen Skowronek and Richard Bensel, have constantly cross-referenced each other and confidently spoken on behalf of the field. In 2004, for example, Skowronek co-

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11 Ibid, 18.
12 Ibid, 233.
authored what was meant as an authoritative account of APD as a sub-field in political science. If Livingston had written *Origins of the Federal Reserve* in 1996 as opposed to 1986, he would have certainly offered some comments on APD scholarship and located his study in relation to the growing strain. But in the mid-1980s the sub-field had yet to infiltrate the discipline of history.

The same year Livingston's book came out, William Leuchtenburg called for more studies on the state. He urged historians to once again pay attention to politics generally, but he further specified that they should analyze government institutions. Echoing Theda Skocpol, a sociologist discussed below, he came out strongly in favor of "bringing the state back in." He suggested that political historians knew very little about the state despite its past importance and its ever-growing influence.

When Leuchtenburg referenced "bringing the state back in," he was directing historians to scholarship that was becoming known as APD. At the time, scholars trumpeting the value of analyzing "the state" were considered part of the burgeoning realm of historical institutionalism, a sizable domain within the social sciences that paid attention to how institutions change over time. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, social scientists increasingly questioned the society-centered approach of previous work, and began investigating the way that institutions in politics, in the economy, and in society limited human action. The Organizational Synthesis, emerged as one branch of this shift in scholarly attention, but, according to Louis Galambos, scholars like Wiebe had a specific interest in modern bureaucracies, a much more precise subject matter than the broader concept of institutions. APD grew with this larger trend in the social sciences and can be conceptualized as historical institutionalism applied to American government.

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For an extended and detailed definition, see Orren and Skowronek, *American Political Development*, Ch. 4.
Also in 1986, APD became an institutionalized field when two political scientists, the aforementioned authority figure Stephen Skowronek and Karen Orren, began *Studies in American Political Development* (SAPD), a scholarly journal that focused on political and institutional development in the United States. The editors would later define APD as "a durable shift in governing authority," which points to how central the state has been in this strain of scholarship. Not every scholar concentrates completely on the state in SAPD, but the state is always present because APD scholars have been, ultimately, interested in mapping the evolution of the American state. While a few political historians contributed in the late 1980s and early 1990s to the journal, most did not.

Just as Robert Wiebe authored the seminal work for the Organizational Synthesis school, Stephen Skowronek delivered the foundational text for APD with *Building a New American State: The Expansion of National Administrative Capacities, 1877–1920.* In the book, published in 1982, Skowronek neatly summed up theoretical insights that had been percolating through the social sciences and developed significant new interpretations of how American politics have developed over time. He presented a theory of political development that treated institutions as historical entities. Previous accounts of American political development, Skowronek argued, had focused on how forces external to the state, like class conflict or war, and pressured the state to adapt. Skowronek argued that this approach overlooked the significance of the internal arrangements of institutions. "The collective action of government officials in responding to environmental changes," Skowronek claimed, "is mediated by the institutional and political arrangements that define their positions and support their prerogatives within the state apparatus." He advocated putting state institutions at the center of analysis in order to account for political development because only by looking at structures over time could scholars fully appreciate the innovations and limitations of a period.

Putting his theory into practice, Skowronek created broad, new interpretations of American politics by synthesizing existing scholarship. He began the book by overturning previous accounts of nineteenth century America, which had characterized the country as stateless because it did not look like European nations. America was exceptional, he claimed, but not "for the absence of a state but for the peculiar way

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[9] Ibid, 12.
state power was organized." In a famous formulation, he described America's nineteenth century state as one of "courts and parties," where the courts organized the economy and the parties organized patronage. This system managed the interactions of state and society, and while it was extensive and spanned the nation, it was not very intensive compared to the modern American state. Instead of looking for specific, universal qualities that all states have, as earlier political theory might have, Skowronek looked at the unique system that existed during a particular time.

After establishing the nineteenth century institutional arrangements in the United States, Skowronek moved to the core of his analysis. He analyzed three crucial aspects of the modern American state—civil administration, the army, and business regulation—through two formative periods of development. Between 1877 and 1900, the immense pressures of urbanization, industrialization, and growing populations, made it hard for the existing state system to meet society's demands, Skowronek contended. While small groups of middle-class reformers pushed for a national bureaucracy, for a centralized army, and for national railroads, the powerful parties simply created new positions and avoided fundamental change. The result, Skowronek claimed, was a patchwork government of temporary solutions to towering problems. Between 1900 and 1920, the bureaucratic-minded reformers gained ground and managed to expand the state's national administrative capacity in order to cope with the pressures of modernization; The executive branch, for example, expanded by developing a meritocratic civil service largely free from the influence of party politics. Despite the new national capacities, the state was not entirely free from the previous arrangement of "courts and parties." All the new bureaus and committees faced constitutional stalemates, as different interests clashed over who could control what. Congress and the President's office, for example, both vied for control over the army and constantly undermined each other's authority.

With his state-centered approach, Skowronek demonstrated that the previous patronage-driven form of national government consistently limited the ways that reformers could build a new American state. The modern institutions of American government still bear the imprint of these struggles for power, he argued. Other scholars, like Robert Wiebe, had described how middle class reformers went about creating new bureaucracies. But Skowronek highlighted how older interests, like more
conservative party politicians, tempered the eventual imperfect shape of those bureaucracies.

Another political scientist had also been researching American state building while Skowronek was reinterpreting the Progressive Era. In 1984, Richard Bensel published *Sectionalism and American Political Development, 1880-1980*, in which he argued that sectionalism in the United States explained the way that American political institutions have developed. All other factors besides regional competition he described as “of secondary, transient importance.” Following Immanuel Wallerstein’s core-periphery model of social economy, he claimed that the industrialized northern states and the underdeveloped southern and western states had conflicting economic interests. Based on these interests, groups from different regions developed regional interests and only came together at opportune moments to forge temporary coalitions. Throughout the century covered by the study, Bensel also argued that these divisions stayed constant. Unlike Skowronek, he relied heavily on primary sources, carefully picking through the roll call votes in the House of Representatives.

While Skowronek had watched the state resist pressure from society, Bensel told a different story. Bensel looked at how the divides in society, like the regional economic concerns, became institutionalized in the state and how the state, in turn, reinforced these divisions. To take one of Bensel’s examples, when the House created a strong committee system, the “sectional stress” in roll calls declined. Bensel argued that “the representatives of the core and periphery regions [carved] up the national political economy into sectors which the sectional poles could then control.” This parallels Livingston’s analysis of how the modern ruling class became entrenched in the American state. However, Livingston traced the birth of a class, whereas Bensel followed the strengthening of an existing sectional divide.

In 1990, Richard Bensel would again contribute to the development of APD, by arguing that “the American state emerged from the wreckage of the Civil War,” in *Yankee Leviathan: The Origins of Central State Authority in America, 1859-1877*. Though he did not frame it as such, Bensel’s account directly challenged Skowronek’s *Building a New American State*. In contrast to Skowronek’s state of “courts and parties,” Bensel

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32Ibid., 411.
33Ibid., 53.

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purposed that there were "at least five different American states in the late-nineteenth century: the self-effacing antebellum state; the two national governments of the Civil War; the highly centralized Reconstruction state; and the market-oriented state that followed the withdrawal of military troops from the South." Skowronek had brushed the Civil War aside in less than two pages, claiming that the institutional achievements of the war were quickly undone by party politics in the 1870s. Bensel, however, saw the war and the Reconstruction Era as the beginning of national state formation, deserving of more than four hundred pages. While offering new assessments of American political history, Bensel also softly critiqued the casual use of theory by other APD scholars. Others had failed to offer specific frameworks for discussing the state, he believed. So in his own work, Bensel defined seven dimensions of state structure and authority in order to make intensely objective comparisons between the Confederate states and the Union.

In 1985, soon after Bensel's first book was published, a now well-known collection of essays edited by three sociologists came out called Bringing the State Back In. Though all of the essays added to the growing literature of historical institutionalism, one of them became the backbone of APD. Theda Skocpol's historiographical introduction, entitled "Bringing the State Back In: Strategies of Analysis in Current Research," provided a "conceptual framework of reference" for social scientists, that APD scholars would obsessively cite as a cornerstone of state theory. Skocpol claimed more and more scholars were rejecting a purely socioeconomic approach, a society-centered look, which failed to take into account the limitations imposed by existing institutions. In place of this, she claimed scholars were beginning to point to two big ideas about the state, which she sculpted into refined arguments. First, she argued, the state should be seen as an autonomous entity. States formulate goals for themselves, she said. In the face of domestic disturbances like riots, for example, states attempt to preserve their power by restoring order. Second, she argued, states help shape the patterns and meanings of politics in a given society. In other words, "the meanings of public life and the collective forms through which groups become aware of political goals and work to attain them arise, not from societies alone,

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25 Ibid., 17.
26 See Ibid., 106-113.
27 Peter R. Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol, eds., Bringing the State Back In (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).
but at the meeting points of states and societies." For example, certain unconnected masses of people can come together and form a politicized group identity in the face of a certain institutional arrangements. This is partly what happened to the businessmen in Livingston's account of Progressive Era banking reform, although their group identity arose through the creation of a new state apparatus.

In 1992, Skocpol expanded on these theoretical contributions in a massive study of welfare policies in the United States entitled Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States. In a lengthy introduction, Skocpol again articulated several key ideas that would shape APD. First, she broadened her earlier discussion of "state-centered" approaches by claiming that Protecting Soldiers and Mothers took a "polity-centered" approach. "This approach views the polity as the primary locus of action, yet understands political activities, whether carried on by politicians or by social groups, as conditioned by the institutional configurations of governments and political party systems," she explained. This aligned her more with Bensel's use of institutions in Sectionalism in American Political Development because she was including political groups working outside of the state. When Skowronek looked at political parties in Building a New American State, he only paid close attention to them when they were the state, or were working directly inside the state.

Second, Skocpol articulated the long-term feedback effects of social policies, the way that society and state shape each other over time. She pointed out that when social groups manage to affect change in the state, the restructured state could reconstitute the limits of that social group as well as the group's political goals. The altered group might then push for different policies and this process could continue as both the state and society are reworked. On the other hand, the policies might make it harder for the original group of benefactors to affect change, or alter the way that other groups could push a separate agenda.

Skocpol provided extended historical case studies of this feedback theory of policy in her book. To give her first example, after the Civil War, the Republican party expanded the eligibility for ex-Union army veterans benefits in several waves as part of the patronage system described by Skowronek. As more veterans gained access to the welfare net, other excluded veterans pushed for the government to expand accessibility even further. This pattern of broadening patronage to
veterans, Skocpol argued, later proved to be a barrier to expanding social policy in the early twentieth century. The previous policy of issuing support to ex-soldiers had affected the political situation and prevented other policies from being implemented, demonstrating her maxim: “As politics creates policies, policies also remake politics.”

Third, Skocpol theorized that there must be a “fit” between political institutions and group capacities in order for a policy to be successfully enacted by the state. She claimed that if a group was not organized in a way that was complementary to the way a state was set up, then that group would probably not fulfill its political ambitions very easily. “The overall structure of political institutions provides access and leverage to some groups and alliances,” she said, “thus encouraging and rewarding their efforts to shape government policies, while simultaneously denying access and leverage to other groups and alliances.”

In her best example of this, Skocpol showed how women’s organizations temporarily had significant influence on social policy in the United States during the Progressive Era because of the way their structures “fit” the avenues of government. Institutions like the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, the General Federation of Women’s Clubs, and the National Consumer League connected women around the country and empowered them to play an active role in the polity at a time when other organizations could get little done. These well-connected, far-reaching organizations could pressure lawmakers by quickly getting women from all over to write their congressional representatives. This, and other strategies, allowed them to successfully lobby for the creation of a Children’s Bureau, which greatly expanded its influence from 1912 to 1921, and the passing of the Sheppard-Towner Infancy and Maternity Protection Act, which provided federal funding for clinics that educated women on child birth and child care.

While Skowronek looked at how new institutions are built on top of old institutions, and Bensel explored how regional economic interests and war shaped politics and institutions, Skocpol revealed the ways that institutions shape society, and in turn, how society shapes institutions. Taken together, these social scientists made a strong case for including the state in any analysis of politics. They forcefully articulated general theories and suggested that other scholars use them to extend investigations of American government. This, perhaps, is a major reason that someone like Livingston has not been hyped as a pioneer in APD scholarship despite his contributions. He offered his book as a history of

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3See Ibid., Ch. 5.
3Ibid., 58.
3Ibid., 54.
one time and place without pushing others to transpose his findings to other sections of government.

Other social scientists continued this state-centered emphasis, but made critiques of earlier accounts. In 1994, the political scientist Gerald Berk published a direct challenge to Skowronek. He argued that the new institutionalism, by which he really meant Skowronek, was stuck in a teleological narrative, where state building was an “adaptive enterprise” to fix an inevitable problem that only had a single solution. Berk argued that the reformers described by Skowronek did not have a coherent, fully formed plan for what was best in building a new state on top of an old state. The process was political and contested, Berk claimed. The reformers were divided between two main visions for the future of American government: corporate liberalism and regional republicanism. The former won out in the end, but was not the sole option during the period. The latter, which was “a more decentralized, less hierarchical, and more public alternative,” lost out because, as Berk documents, supporters of both visions clashed at critical junctures in the courtroom, in Congress, and in the Interstate Commerce Commission. In Berk’s narrative, the era was one marked by competing experiments, while in Skowronek’s the era was defined by a protracted struggle towards modern governance, a singular, assumed end.

In 1999, Elizabeth Sanders, who is married to Richard Bensel, argued: “agrarian movements constituted the main forced political force driving the development of the American national state in the half century before World War I.” Sanders pointed out that scholars like Skowronek had focused on “the executive branch and a small proto-public service intelligentsia,” so she would “set the record straight” by detailing the non-elite movements of farmers and workers, as well as highlighting the legislative branch. Like Bensel, Sanders used roll calls and divided the country into a northern industrial core and southern and western peripheries. In her book, state-building looked quite different than in Skowronke's, where middle-class professionals battled an antiquated system simply to make it more efficient. Sanders showed farmers pushing for a statist agenda without bureaucracy and eventually succeeding in reaching specific goals, like an income tax, and a federally funded

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36 Ibid., 4.
38 Ibid., 2.
road system, but failing because the government quickly ballooned into a heavy bureaucracy.

The work of Berk and Sanders provide just two examples of a ceaseless swarm of APD scholarship that flourished after the 1980s in the social sciences. The foundational texts by Skowronek and Skocpol showed up in footnote after footnote. And while political scientists and sociologists continued to draw on the insights made by the pioneers of APD during the 1990s, historians also began to turn towards APD. Several historians of American law, for example, drew on APD's state-centered approach as an alternative to the dominant trend in the field, which focused on law as a cultural text. In 1998, Daniel Ernst pointed out that the ideas of Stephen Skowronek and Gerald Berk helped legal historians think about the past. He called Skowronek's first book "only a starting point," in understanding how America's legal institutions transformed from weak bodies to powerful ones.

As a model for how well APD-style work could succeed, Ernst pointed to a 1996 book by the legal historian William Novak. In it, Novak analyzed the legal and political ideology that supported the nineteenth century state and documented how extensive government regulation actually was before the Civil War. Taking after APD scholars who had been busy "bringing the state back in," Novak claimed to merge an analysis of how state and society are mutually constitutive by looking at everyday state practices in nineteenth century America, an approach he called "governance as conduct." Instead of rereading the Federalist papers, Novak turned to local court logs to uncover how the American government sought to regulate the lives of its citizens. Echoing Skowronek's exploration of how existing institutions temper institutional reform, Novak claimed that changes in the nineteenth century American government and law "occurred under the heavy weight of past public traditions."

Novak sought to uncover a lost political ideology which centered on building a "well-regulated society" and pervaded the nineteenth century, but which has since been buried by twentieth century ideas about government. Legal thinkers and state officials, Novak claimed, believed

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40Ernst, "Law and American Political Development."
41Ibid., 210.
43Ibid., 8.
44Ibid., 18.
that the role of the state was to look after the welfare of society as a whole, as opposed to standing up for the rights of individuals. Drawing on a long tradition of common law thought and rejecting natural rights philosophy, they saw man as a social creature with obligations to the community and thought that law stemmed from historical precedent, not transcendent universal truths.

This “conception of governance in a well-regulated society could not contrast more completely with negative liberal notions of a minimalist or night-watchman state,” Novak said. In the twentieth century, liberal constitutionalism would come to dominate American ideas about the state and society, blinding scholars from understanding how nineteenth century Americans thought about the state and how extensive it was. This philosophy saw liberty as freedom from state intervention and focused on defending the rights of individuals, whereas the “well-regulated society” ideology had claimed that the state needed to protect society from individuals by enforcing the communal duties of each person.

After outlining this way of thinking, Novak chronicled how local officials tried to build this “well-regulated society” by instituting “a plethora of bylaws, ordinances, statutes, and common law restrictions regulating nearly every aspect of early American economy and society, from Sunday observance to the carting of offal.” He was operating in the space opened up by Skowronek’s book, which had described the nineteenth century government as made up of “courts and parties.” But Novak went much further by listing hundreds of ways that the state looked after public safety, public economy, public morality, public works, and public health. His account demonstrated that the government profoundly shaped the everyday lives of Americans. Local government determined how people could sell products, protected people from fire, controlled access to rivers and roads, and looked after the health of the population. It was not an era of freedom as envisioned by liberal constitutionalism where individuals walked around unfettered by an interventionist state.

Skowronek had mentioned that the courts provided some regulation over the economy, but Novak portrayed the state as actually playing an extremely active role in regulating and even transforming the economy. Novak argued that police enforcement, not the invisible hand, allowed America to develop a capitalist economy. Bensel had seen modern American government arising from the Civil War, but he had assumed

45 Ibid., 43.
46 Ibid., 1.
47 See Ibid., Ch. 3.
no substantial state had existed before the 1860s, which Novak successfully challenged. Novak saw the history of American government as falling into two periods: the first was defined by "the well-regulated society" ideology and lasted until Reconstruction, when the second arose and liberal constitutionalism took hold. So while Bensel's book showed an elementary state becoming complex, Novak's work presented an already extensive state before it was transmogrified by a new ideology.

At the same time that legal scholars like Novak started focusing on institutions and working with APD conclusions about the American state, several historians of the early Republic did the same. In 1995, Richard John issued an account of the post office's role in public life from the 1770s to the 1840s. He explicitly turned away from social history in order to study political institutions because he believed that public policy profoundly influenced everyday life in America, a fact that social historians overlooked. John claimed that by passing the 1792 Post Office Act the federal government fostered a communication revolution that transformed the way that people thought about their place in the world. The act subsidized the circulation of newspapers, which allowed the United States to build a massive reading public. Following Benedict Anderson, John argued that the post office created an "imagined community" known as America by spreading information and allowing people to think about themselves as living under the federal government and having a shared identity with other Americans.

John's work demonstrated how both the organizational synthesis school and APD interacted to push historians into taking the "institutional turn." Alfred Chandler, an organizational synthesis historian, had been on John's committee for the dissertation on which Spreading the News was based. While Chandler would have pushed him to consider institutions as central to history in general, John drew on APD literature in thinking about the specific nature of institutions. For example, following Skocpol's 1985 essay on the state as an historical actor, John saw the central government as a "powerful agent of change." Some of John's specific arguments about cause and effect also echoed Skocpol's work. For instance, the Sabbatarians perceived the postal service to be an

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49 Ibid., Ch. 4.
intrusion on their lives.51 Later, John said, this would shape the way that Sabbatarians thought about the issue of slavery by making them focus on the central government as an epicenter of such an evil institution. John’s examples of how public policy can alter the political consciousness of groups, or even create groups, definitely mirrors several parts of Skocpol’s Protecting Mothers and Soldiers.

Building on Novak, John and others, legal historians and historians of the early Republic increasingly turned to APD’s obsession with the state through the 2000s. In a 2008 essay, for example, Mark Wilson followed Novak in thinking that the early state had a strong influence on American life in more ways than just through the postal service.52 Wilson offered a complete reversal of Skowronek’s conception of a small, loose national state of “courts and parties” and Bensel’s idea that national government began to grow during the Civil War, saying “the early United States saw a remarkable expansion of state institutions.”53 He claimed that the pre-Civil War era saw state-driven national institutional expansion in communications, banking, and local state control. Moreover, as the country’s territory expanded, the state managed to expand tariffs and military control.

Just as historians of American law and the early republic became involved in APD over the last fifteen years, many other historians have turned to state-centered approaches. In 2003, Meg Jacobs, William Novak, and Julian Zelizer offered a collection of essays intended to demonstrate what was hot in political history entitled The Democratic Experiment: New Directions in American Political History. Although they claimed that the two main strains dominated the book, the institutional approach and the sociocultural, most of the contributors stuck to the institutional. As this fact indicates, APD’s emphasis on the state has been widely adopted since the 1990s by political historians of America. It would be impossible to uncover every trace of APD within the field, so only a few examples will be given here.

Following up this collection of APD-style essays, Jacobs published Pocketbook Politics: Economic Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America


53Ibid., 4.
in 2005.\textsuperscript{54} The book added to the burgeoning strain of institution-focused scholarship that Jacobs and her co-editors had described in \textit{The Democratic Experiment}. Jacobs emphasized the state and state development, though she included less political theory than previous books in this vein, like Novak's \textit{The People's Welfare}. Jacobs insisted on "the centrality of national politics and the state in the nearly century-long fight to fulfill the American dream of abundance."\textsuperscript{55} While social historians had documented grassroots consumer movements and political historians had documented elite politics, Jacobs saw her book as a synthesis of social and political history, which combined these two interwoven subjects, just as Novak had seen his book as a balance between the society-centered and state-centered approaches.

In the book, Jacobs described a process that she called "state-building from the bottom up," by looking at how ordinary Americans maintained politically conscious consumer groups from the turn of the century to the early 1970s. The "pocketbook politics" of these coalitions led to government regulation, she argued, and the existence of these grassroots organizations that fought for purchasing power lent legitimacy to the policies enacted by the elite in government. Her conclusions paralleled those made by Elizabeth Sanders in \textit{Roots of Reform} because both scholars contended that non-elite groups working outside of the state actually influenced the development of American government, recalling the way that women's organizations had shaped early welfare policy in Skocpol's work.

Just as Jacobs and Sanders had looked at how common people tried to influence the American state, another historian has recently reinterpreted the Populist movement of the Gilded Age as a spirited attempt by ordinary citizens to make their government more modern. In \textit{The Populist Vision}, released in 2007, Charles Postel argues that, contrary to long held stereotypes, the "broad coalition of farmers, wage earners and middle-class activists" known as the Populists were in touch with the pulse of modernity, as opposed to being backwards-looking traditionalists.\textsuperscript{56} They embraced technology and new methods of organization in order to challenge the status quo.

Like the work of Jacobs, APD literature had a direct impact on \textit{The Populist Vision}. For one, Postel builds on Livingston's \textit{Origins of the Federal Reserve} and Berk's \textit{Alternative Tracks}, which both demonstrated

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    \item \textsuperscript{56}Charles Postel, \textit{The Populist Vision} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 4.
\end{itemize}
that state development did not follow an inevitable path to its modern form, but instead was contingent on debates before the first World War. This helps Postel examine the Populists as people with rational goals. Instead of thinking about them as fighting an impossible battle, as previous scholars had done, Postel credits them with producing a viable alternative to the domination of large elite-owned corporations.

At the same time that APD helped Postel think about the possibilities of the Populist movement, APD also helped him think about the movement’s limitations. He concludes that the Populists failed in presidential politics because the two major parties commanded the existing political institutions. The parties simply had more resources and “fit” better with the way the system was set up. Although he does not use Skocpol's word, this idea comes across in his conclusion and points to Protecting Mother’s and Soldiers.

In a general way both Jacobs and Postel worked within the APD tradition by melding state-centered and society-centered approaches to the past. Another historian, though, has recently echoed APD even more directly. Following the path of Skowronek’s foundational text, Robin Einhorn begins and ends with the state in her 2009 release American Taxation, American Slavery. The book concentrates on government institutions in order to challenge myths about taxation in American history. Like Bensel, she sees sectional and economic interests as key to explaining the American past.

Taking the government as an “autonomous entity,” like Skowronek, John, and other APD scholars, Einhorn argues that the institution of slavery deeply shaped the institutions of taxation in the United States. Slavery explains the yawning gap between the North’s democratic, competent governments and the less equal, backwards Southern ones, she says. During the colonial period, local and colony-wide governments in the North developed a tradition of taxing property based on valuation, which required the states to build complex bureaucracies. In the South, however, slaveholders ensured that poll taxes dominated taxation, which required little to no local government. After the Revolution, this sectional divide persisted. Shay’s Rebellion occurred in Massachusetts, Einhorn claims, because the state had the capacity to go out and demand money from its citizens, while Virginia and other Southern states simply did not have the local presence to create a similar backlash. This parallels Skocpol’s discussion of how the capacity of institutions determines if something is possible or not.

57 Ibid., 271.
58 Robin Einhorn, American Taxation, American Slavery (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2009).

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Slavery influenced discussions of taxation until the Civil War, she further argues, because uniformity clauses, which were meant to protect tax laws against the attitudes of majorities, came from the South. Beginning in the Age of Jackson, states all over the country began adopting constitutional limits on tax laws, a trend which began in the South and spread to the North. Although plantation owners used them to entrench their influence and avoid being challenged, Northerns adopted them in order to force the upper classes to pay their fair share of taxes. Ironically, Einhorn says, this sheltered Northern elites from the influence of “the people.”

Robin Einhorn's use of APD literature provides an example of the way that many historians have, in the last fifteen years, not only been influenced by APD scholarship, but have become part of the field. James Livingston explored similar themes to Stephen Skowronek and Theda Skocpol, but did not link up with them in his work during the 1980s. In contrast, Richard John and William Novak conversed with APD scholars in the mid-1990s and pushed other historians to follow Skocpol and take the institutional turn. In the 2000s, Meg Jacobs and Charles Postel drew inspiration from social scientists like Elizabeth Sanders and Gerald Berk. Einhorn did also. Yet, she also says that Richard John had an immense impact on her work, pointing to the fact that historians have become insiders within the field who spread APD ideas to other historians.

This essay has taken a broad view of how American Political Development came into being and how it trickled—then gushed—into the field of history. Since at least William Leuchtenburg's speech in 1986, historians have recognized that during the 1980s social scientists were coming up with powerful ways of talking about America's political past by stressing the importance of the state. Today, Robert Johnston rightly believes that historians have not only adopted APD, but become influential producers of this strain of scholarship.

Brian Rutledge is finishing his thesis to complete the World History M.A. this semester at San Francisco State. In the fall, Brian will be starting at Cornell to do a PhD in African History.

59Ibid., 204.