What Political Science Can Learn from the New Political History

Julian E. Zelizer

Department of History, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey 08540; email: jzelizer@princeton.edu

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Abstract

This essay explores how three components of the new political history— research on the motivations behind the rise of conservatism, the discovery of the nineteenth-century state, and arguments about the particularities of public policy—can offer useful analytical tools for political scientists.
INTRODUCTION

One of the most exciting developments in recent years for students of American politics has been the growing number of scholars who are interested in and willing to cross the disciplinary divide. The field of American political development (APD) has offered a meeting point for political scientists, sociologists, and historians whose research focuses on the political evolution of the United States. Although the disciplines approach their subject from very different analytical, and sometimes methodological, perspectives, considerable room has emerged for productive interaction. We should not miss this opportunity.

Whereas historians are very cognizant of the contributions that historically oriented political scientists have offered them, the reverse is not always true. Given that for many decades the field of political history had languished, and APD was in fact an effort to fill the gap that had opened up, it was logical for political scientists and political sociologists to have this bias. But there has been a renaissance in political history during the past ten years, and an extensive body of research has emerged. Although some of the work is not directly applicable to the work of political scientists, there are several key areas and arguments that deserve attention.

This essay begins by examining how political historians have rebuilt their field in recent years. I then turn to three particular aspects of the literature—research on the motivations behind the rise of conservatism, the discovery of the nineteenth-century state, and arguments about the particularities of public policy—all of which are essential starting points for beginning an interdisciplinary dialogue.

THE REVITALIZATION OF POLITICAL HISTORY

It is now possible to write about the field of American political history without focusing on a crisis that grips this area of scholarship. This was not realistic just ten years ago, when most senior political historians were spending most of their time lamenting how changes within the profession had marginalized their field (Leuchtenburg 1986, Silbey 1999).

Their fears were not irrational. During the 1970s and 1980s, a new generation of historians—shaped by the bitter conflicts of the 1960s, with many of them being former members of the New Left on college campuses—had rejected the traditional historical study of presidents and parties as irrelevant to the lived experience of most Americans and as an approach that exaggerated the possibilities for altering power relations within the United States.

In other words, the changes that resulted from Democrats or Republicans holding office, they said, were minimal. Convinced by the types of arguments made by the sociologist C. Wright Mills about the existence of an entrenched power elite who controlled decision making, the Baby Boom generation of historians instead decided to focus the majority of their research attention on recovering the history of forgotten voices from the bottom up and documenting cultural phenomena that seemed much more relevant to the lives of average citizens than who was president. Taking seriously the argument that the personal was political, they examined the ongoing contests over class, race, ethnicity, and gender that had taken place across America. The historian Eric Foner argued in 1990, “The old ‘presidential synthesis’ is dead (and not lamented)” (Leff 1995, p. 829).

Political history did not disappear, however. On the margins of the profession (as measured by hiring, book publications, and articles published in prestigious journals), numerous factions of scholars worked hard to reinvent how the field of political history was practiced.

Scholars of the “organizational synthesis” argued that the main story in American political history took place between the 1880s and 1920s with the emergence of national, centralized institutions, namely the corporation, professions, and the administrative state, which replaced the localized and decentralized political economy of the nineteenth century (Hays 1957; Wiebe 1967; Galambos 1970, 1983; Keller 1977).
Meanwhile, historians of American political culture engaged in a vibrant debate over the ideological origins of the American Revolution, trying to determine whether liberalism, Christianity, or republicanism was the most powerful determinant in shaping the minds and rhetoric of the colonists as they confronted London (Bailyn 1967, Wood 1969, Pocock 1975, Appleby 1984, Kloppenberg 1987). There were also social historians, such as Michael Katz, who wrote about how Americans experienced policies such as education and welfare, and how those policies often reified social hierarchies (Katz 1968). A different strategy for combining social and political history emerged in the 1970s with quantitative historians, who called themselves practitioners of the “new political history.” They examined how enfranchised citizens in the nineteenth century reached their decisions about which party to vote for; their work attempted to measure which influence mattered more, economic or cultural background (Kleppner 1970, Silbey et al. 1978). Finally, there was the advent of policy history in the late 1970s, with historians who were eager to contribute to contemporary debates over governance (Zelizer 2000, Graham 1993).

As a result of various factors, which I and others have explored, none of these efforts were able to significantly strengthen the standing of political history within the mainstream of the profession until the late 1990s, as the trend-setting historians still focused squarely on social and cultural history (Jacobs & Zelizer 2003, Zelizer 2004, Leff 1995). Even though exciting scholarship was being produced about politics that moved beyond the old presidential synthesis of the 1940s and 1950s, there was little evidence in the hiring decisions of the top history departments that political history had returned.

But that era of struggle has come to an end. In 2009, the field of American political history is no longer wandering in the academic wilderness; it has emerged at the forefront of the profession, where it had been between the 1880s and 1960s. There are a number of reasons behind this dramatic change of fortune. Within political science, the emergence of the field of APD proved to be instrumental to offering younger historians a professional network through which to develop their scholarship. Just as important, APD offered a series of exciting analytic arguments that led scholars to write political history in fresh ways. For example, arguments about state autonomy stimulated archival interest in the history of bureaucrats and staffers who developed policies based on their own interests and agendas rather than simply in response to social pressure. Many younger historians were also extremely interested in exploring how the structure of political institutions did or did not shape the kinds of alternatives that were available to political actors at all levels of politics in different moments of history. Although historians shied away from overly determinist accounts, the basic argument about institutional design proved to be appealing.

Social and cultural history also unexpectedly offered opportunities for political historians to re-energize their field. Lizabeth Cohen generated excitement through her book on how industrial workers overcame ethnic divisions and made the New Deal by forging a coalition that sustained the Democratic Party (Cohen 1991). A path-breaking book by the pioneering labor historian David Montgomery explained how, as a result of changes in managerial control on the shop floor within the corporation, coupled with the failure by the American Federation of Labor to achieve a stable place in the Democratic Party during the mid-1910s, workers never gained a strong position in the polity (Montgomery 1987).

Several senior scholars who specialized in gender and race, who began their careers in the 1960s and 1970s by rebelling against “traditional” political history and writing social history from the bottom up, started to examine the ways in which gendered and racialized cultural conceptions about the workforce shaped areas of public policy like Old Age Insurance and Aid to Families with Dependent Children. They imported from APD the notion that the welfare state constructed in the 1930s had two tiers separating superior programs that were federally administered, provided universal...
benefits, and were funded through strong and often earmarked revenue sources, from inferior programs that were means tested, administered by state and local government, and funded from general revenue. Two pioneers in the field of gender history, Gordon (1994) and Kessler-Harris (2001), for example, argued that the concept of a household with a single, male wage earner was integral to the structure of Old Age Insurance as well as the tax code. Other historians claimed that the reason why certain occupations were excluded from the privileged “first tier” of the welfare state (primarily domestic and agricultural workers) was that they were jobs with a high percentage of African American workers. Because southern Democrats controlled congressional committees in the 1930s, they argued, a deal was struck to allow for new federal programs as long as they did not allow federal administrators to tamper with race relations in their region (Katznelson 2005).

THE RISE OF CONSERVATISM
The past decade has seen a massive proliferation of research on U.S. political history by new political historians who were not so invested in the debates of the 1960s and who are building on the work of political scientists and historians who continued to think about politics even as the subfield struggled.

The first area of research has been to trace the rise of conservatism. In 1994, Alan Brinkley published an article in the *American Historical Review* that lamented how little work had been done on modern American conservatism. He wrote that it would not be “a very controversial claim to say that twentieth century American conservatism has been something of an orphan in historical scholarship” (Brinkley 1994, p. 409). Historians had focused most of their research on the formation of the New Deal coalition and the evolution of liberalism in the twentieth century. After Brinkley’s article, however, a group of post-Baby Boom political historians (primarily, though some of the work came from more senior scholars as well) challenged older assumptions about the place of conservatism in contemporary politics. They disputed the claims by the liberal-consensus school of the 1950s and 1960s that conservatism was a marginal force in national political life, promoted primarily by uneducated citizens who stood far outside the mainstream. The conventional wisdom among social scientists of that earlier era had also stipulated that modern conservatism was a political agenda that had been defined and driven by elite actors—from Senator Joseph McCarthy in the early 1950s to Barry Goldwater in the 1960s (and, later work stressed, Ronald Reagan in the 1980s)—who played to the anxieties of Americans.

These claims were harder to justify by the mid-1990s, when the conservative movement had firmly established itself in Washington and state capitals for over a decade. The new scholarship on conservatism painted a very different picture than the previous generation of political historians, who wrote from the perspective of Franklin Roosevelt rather than Ronald Reagan. These historians of conservatism, most of whom were politically to the left, described an energetic political mobilization that had started with activities surrounding Goldwater’s campaign in 1964 and accelerated into the 1970s. This work painted the 1970s as a pivotal decade, more so than the 1960s.

In contrast to much of the political science scholarship that focuses on the economic basis of conservative politics (Graetz & Shapiro 2006, McCarty et al. 2006, Shafer & Johnston 2006, Bartels 2008), historians have emphasized nonmaterial motivations that drove the movement, ranging from anxieties about national security to social tensions over race and gender. The conservative movement, according to the historical scholarship, was more diverse and multifaceted than historians originally suspected. McGirr’s (2001) book on Orange County, California revealed how many conservative activists were middle-class, suburban Americans, driven by fears of communism and cultural norms, disconnected from the racial animosity that animated many southerners.

In contrast, younger southern historians argued that racial politics remained central to
conservatism after the 1960s, but that the political dynamics over these issues did not differ much from those in the north (Kruse 2005, Lassiter 2006, Crespino 2009). These southern specialists put forth a series of arguments about how southern conservatism came to shape national political debate in the post-1964 era. Crespino stressed that southern conservatives responded to civil rights activism by recasting their emphasis toward issues that were not explicitly racial and national in scope, such as schooling and the protection of churches. Kruse focused on how southern resistance to civil rights survived the 1960s through white flight and the accompanying political issues of privatization and tax revolts. Lassiter argues that southern conservatism, like northern conservatism, came to focus on the ideology of “suburban entitlement,” which ignored the ways that government was essential to maintaining these residential areas and which offered an aggressive defense of policies and rights that were detrimental to most African Americans.

Still other scholars have looked at the central role played by evangelical religious leaders who entered the political realm and successfully tapped into vast membership groups in churches. Jerry Falwell, Donald Wildmon, James Dobson, and other leaders created an infrastructure of television shows, publications, and radio shows that were crucial to the right (Boyer 2008).

In addition to the motivations behind right-wing activism, there has been important work on the organizational mechanisms and political strategies of the movement, starting with those behind the 1964 Barry Goldwater campaign (Perlstein 2001). Here, economics has received greater emphasis, but the focus is on the money that went to support the movement, not on economics as the sole motivation that fueled activists. Phillips-Fein (2009) and O’Connor (2008) have written about the donors who funded the think tanks and congressional candidates that pushed the Republican Party away from its liberal northeastern wing and toward the right (Phillips-Fein, more than most historians, does stress the importance of concerns about political economy to conservatives).

The literature on the conservative movement has revealed that right-wing activists often employed tactics from the New Left in the 1960s for very different political objectives. From the use of direct mail for soliciting funds to the mobilization of college students behind conservative causes, the political mechanisms of conservatives and liberals were not as far apart as were their ideas.

Although the scholarship has not resolved many disputes over the motivation behind conservatism, there has been a general consensus that this was not a top-down movement, nor was it confined to Americans on the margins. Nor were the motivations of conservatives entirely economic.

**REVISITING THE NINETEENTH CENTURY**

A second important area of scholarship has been to reconceptualize politics in nineteenth-century America. Many political scientists have continued to rely on the conception that the government played a minimal role in American politics in the nineteenth century. One of the founders of APD, Stephen Skowronek, famously argued that the nineteenth century was characterized by a “state of courts and parties” that was replaced by an administrative state following the progressive era. Skowronek’s formulation became the straw man for many historians who saw a different past, although his actual argument was much more subtle (Skowronek 1982).

As a result of this interpretation, many political scientists, and historians, have started with the assumption that antistatist values are deeply rooted in the United States based on the fact that the nation lacked a strong government presence for so long and that our current institutions emerged in response to industrialization and economic crisis. Many have also subscribed to the myth that until the twentieth century we had a laissez-faire economy and that somehow public policy since the progressive
era has moved the polity away from its natural path.

But scholars have punctured the myths that the nineteenth century was “stateless” and characterized by a laissez-faire economy. As the historian Brian Balogh has recently argued in his important synthesis of the century, the literature on the nineteenth century has undermined the one belief on which liberals and conservatives had been able to agree: that the federal government was not a major force in American life before the progressive era (Balogh 2009). Balogh explains that “Americans sought active governance at the federal level time and again over the course of the nineteenth century. Their efforts produced a variety of mechanisms, from debt assumption to Supreme Court decisions that undercut the health and safety prerogatives of states in the name of interstate commerce” (p. 19).

The new political historians have made a convincing case that government was an important component of the United States long before the progressive era started. According to Richard John, recent research about the nineteenth century shares “the conviction that the ‘party period’ paradigm and the ‘courts-and-parties’ construct are inadequate interpretative frames through which to view the nineteenth-century political economy… they exaggerate the influence on policymaking of party leaders, underestimate the integrity of the judiciary, and neglect the often-vital role in the policy process of administrators, lobbyists, and property owners” (John 2006, p. 8). John’s own monograph revealed that administrative government had been important in the early Republic. His book on the development of the U.S. postal system claimed that the delivery of mail was a huge milestone in the evolution of communication policy, and that the United States developed the capacity to transport mail more effectively than most other comparable countries of that time. The U.S. postal system had five times as many offices as France and many more than Great Britain, British North America, or Russia, just to name a few examples (John 1995, p. 5).

Legal historians have also been instrumental to this new interpretation of the nineteenth century. By exploring the law, Novak (1996) revealed that government intervention was familiar to most Americans at the local level. He found that legal restrictions established regulations to guide numerous kinds of behavior, from fire ordinances to social norms. He focused on regulations involving public safety, public economy, public space, public morals, and public health to show that the notion of a laissez-faire society was incorrect. Novak wrote that the myth of statelessness in the nineteenth century was “the most notorious fallacy in American historiography” (Novak 1996, p. 3).

Diplomatic historians, including Herring (2008), have destroyed the notion of an “isolationist” American nineteenth century by cataloguing the vast number of military interventions that took place in this era, ranging from efforts to conquer Native Americans in the West to the wars with Britain and Spain.

Balogh’s (2009) recent synthesis provides the most compelling interpretation of the federal government in the nineteenth century. He concludes that Americans did oppose federal intervention when it was direct, but that on many issues—especially promoting economic development and the acquisition of new territory—Americans accepted and sought government intervention as long as it was relatively indirect and hidden from public view. Balogh (2009, p. 379) writes that

the mystery of national authority in nineteenth-century America can be resolved once we recognize that although the United States did indeed govern differently than its industrialized counterparts, it did not govern less. Americans did, however, govern *less visibly*. The key feature that distinguished the United States in the nineteenth century was the preference among its citizens for national governance that was inconspicuous. Americans preferred to use the language of the law, the courts, trade policy, fiscal subsidies—supported by indirect taxes—and partnerships with nongovernmental
partners instead of more overt, bureaucratic, and visible interventions into the political economy.

Balogh suggests that the seeds were planted in the nineteenth century for the kind of hidden welfare state that political scientists have explored in the twentieth century (Howard 1997). The result of this work is that historians can no longer depict the nineteenth century as a wasteland for federal governance. To be sure, not all historians agree with this assessment. Rauchway (2006) has argued that by international standards, in most of the important areas of public policy, the nation-state in the United States did remain weak. Nonetheless, there is now compelling evidence on the other side of the debate, namely, that the federal government became an integral part of national life and that the roots of the twentieth century could be traced from these decades. There were particular forms of government in the United States. Much of the nation’s foreign policy was ad hoc and many of its domestic economic interventions were indirect. Yet government was always there.

THE PARTICULARITIES OF PUBLIC POLICY

The third area where there has been a proliferation of work has been policy history. During the past ten years, historians have responded to the vacuum in scholarship on this subject by writing on numerous areas of public policy, ranging from public works to family planning. These historians have traced policy history by using the chronology of public policy—agenda setting, legislation, and implementation—rather than by focusing on presidential administrations or even familiar eras in American politics. Framing their narrative around public policy has also allowed scholars to bring in a broad range of actors when writing about politics—thus responding to some of the criticism from the social and cultural historians—ranging from citizens who are beneficiaries of programs to the politicians that pass them.

One of the biggest differences between most research in political science, including the field of APD, and the new political history is that APD scholars search for singular theoretical models that can best explain the trajectory of policy in different domains. As Katznelson (2003, p. 386) wrote,

APD scholars produce model-like stories that shadow actual history at a higher level of abstraction and with more portable goals than can be found in most writing by historians. These deliberately simplified accounts that characterize actors, designate situations, and portray mechanisms linking agents to structures in ways that often privilege categories and variables over people and places with proper names offer suggestive helpmates to historians who are more enclosed in the peculiarities and exclusivities of their distinct periods and locations. Such intentionally lean representations selectively portray the attributes of actors... and structures... in order to specify the configuration of mechanisms that shape both these actors and structures and define the terms of their interconnection.

In short, APD is not doing history for its own sake. Practitioners want models that are transportable. One of the most popular arguments in APD work is that the structure of political institutions has an enormous effect on the kinds of policies we produce. Carpenter (2001) relies on network analysis to explain how agency leaders are able to achieve autonomy from Congress, while Schickler (2001) focuses on the impact of institutional layering in American political development. Although their studies do revolve around specific areas of politics, the claims are meant to offer a means to understand developmental patterns throughout U.S. politics (Schickler 2001). Pierson (2004) offers one of the most sophisticated analytic arguments about why and how a temporal approach to studying politics is relevant to social scientists.

In contrast, historians shy away from moving beyond their own particular areas of inquiry.
The work of the new political history does make generalizations, but usually the scholarship offers institutional or cultural explanations as to why particular areas of policy turned out the way they did. There is an essential comfort with messiness in these books and articles, which acknowledge that there are multiple causal forces at work. Many historians refrain from arguing that the explanation in their story can provide an understanding of the evolution of other kinds of public policy beyond the one being studied.

The causal explanations in the new political history, when dealing with policy history, have thus varied greatly. For example, Milazzo (2006) traces the history of water control policy. Challenging the argument that the environmental movement was primarily responsible for the emergence of this policy, Milazzo explores how pork-barrel politics and a discourse about systems analysis unexpectedly gave rise to policy. Milazzo writes, “Advocates of economic development, missile system designers, and dam-building bureaucrats may not have represented the typical audience at an Earth Day rally... In the course of pursuing their own agendas within well-established organizational channels, these ubiquitous actors in the nation’s political life took an active interest in water pollution and proceeded to shape how policymakers devised solutions to the problem” (Milazzo 2006, p. 5).

Jacobs (2005) and Klein (2003) place greater weight on political economy when dealing with welfare and fiscal policy. Jacobs argues that policies geared toward boosting consumer demand offered a way for the New Deal coalition to unite working- and middle-class voters between the progressive era and the 1970s. “For nearly sixty years,” Jacobs writes, “from World War I through the Nixon administration, the question of how much things cost fueled American liberalism. The driving desire to secure mass purchasing power put in place a set of institutions and public policies to promote high wages and low prices” (Jacobs 2005, p. 262). Klein found that the power of corporate management within capitalism inscribed inequality into the divided welfare state from its inception (where public policy subsidized benefits such as health care that were delivered through collective bargaining rather than directly through the state), since workers were always at a disadvantage in shaping programs like private pensions (Klein 2003).

In a more recent book, Hamilton (2008) breaks new ground by claiming that technological change—notably, the spread of refrigerated trucking—allowed low-cost consumer goods that undermined the rationale behind New Deal policies. “The most mundane of technologies—highways, refrigerated trailers, and diesel engines, none of which were particularly revolutionary in and of themselves—allowed agribusinesses to materially undermine the New Deal–era political integration of state power, organized labor, and mass consumption within the food economy,” writes Hamilton (2008, p. 5). In her research on women who worked outside the home between the 1870s and 1990s, Boris (1994) explored how gender shaped certain areas of work regulation. Smith’s (2006) account of the history of public works spending and economic development in the 1930s explored multiple factors behind the development of these policies, including the agendas of administrators, electoral and party-building interests, and the role of social movements in pressuring the president.

This third aspect of the new political history complements recent calls by Hacker & Pierson (2009) to bring policy back into the field of American politics. Through debates about common subject matter and archival documents from these very different perspectives, each side will be able to strengthen and define its respective analytic approach.

WHERE ARE HISTORIANS GOING FROM HERE?

As a result of the new political history, the past few years have generated an exciting body of scholarship that is beginning to produce new narratives about the political past from the founding through the contemporary period. But the research has only begun.
There are many issues in great need of further exploration, and it is possible to see early signs of even newer directions. One of the most important topics that must be explored is the history of political economy, a subject that has been allowed to languish for too many decades. With the exceptions of work by a few scholars, such as Jacobs, Klein, Hamilton, and Phillips-Fein, most of the work on political history has focused on questions of welfare, gender, and race. Scholars must turn back to traditional concerns about the relationships between business, labor, and government and their roles in shaping public policy and government institutions. This offers historians a wonderful opportunity to connect with political scientists, not only in APD but also in other subfields, such as political economy.

There has also been insufficient attention to the history of liberalism after the 1960s. Ironically, the voluminous literature on the rise of the right has resulted in downplaying the trajectory of liberalism. The assumption has been that after the famous Democratic Convention of 1968, liberalism imploded and became an insignificant political force. Yet some scholars are questioning this narrative (Zelizer 2010). For instance, Tuck (2008) argues that civil rights activism in the cities proliferated after the 1970s, focusing on new concerns such as prison reform and urban electoral politics. Davies (2007) shows that in areas such as federal education, policies solidified their bureaucratic and interest-group base of power in the 1970s. Conservatives willingly or grudgingly came to accept the permanence of these programs and incorporated them into their agenda, giving rise to big-government conservatism. He writes that “the case of education politics suggests the difficulty of asserting that these were decades of triumph for the antigovernment right. The limits to its success are illustrated by the case with which supporters of federal aid, including many conservatives, rebuffed the intended Reagan Revolution in education during the early 1980s” (Davies 2007, pp. 4–5). Jacobs’s new work is examining how, when dealing with energy policy, conservatives in the 1970s ended up expanding a government that they had hoped to curtail (M. Jacobs, 2008). My recent book on national security stresses the enormous political obstacles that Ronald Reagan faced in the early 1980s as he promoted a hawkish national-security agenda and found that the liberal political forces and institutional legacies of the 1960s remained extraordinarily powerful in constraining presidents (Zelizer 2010).

The interest in the continued importance of liberal politics is related to another area of growing interest: what happened after conservatives rose to power and found themselves in positions of governance (Jacobs & Zelizer 2011, Critchlow 2007). There is new work in progress about the challenges that conservatives faced after they had come to power in the White House and on Capitol Hill. This scholarship is examining the tensions that existed between the rhetoric of conservatives about cutting government and waging war and realities of governing over a sizable and entrenched administrative state. The work is also looking at the challenges posed by deep divisions within the conservative movement once the right lost Democrats as a focus of their attack. Rather than writing about a history of conservatism replacing liberalism, new research will examine the two as political ideologies and political forces that coexisted after the 1970s and were defined in relation to each other.

Political scientists who are interested in institutional persistence as well as social-movement politics will find this scholarship to be of considerable interest, as historians are tackling very similar issues to those with which they are engaged.

The good news is that the scholarship has just begun. But it will be important that historians, along with political scientists and political sociologists, continue to take into account the work of their fellow disciplines, paying close attention to how research findings across the disciplinary borders challenge prevailing assumptions and open up fruitful discussions about the different methodological approaches being used to understand our institutions and policies.
DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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Errata

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