

Social Change and Political Representation in the Long Cycles of American History

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In an op-ed article published in the *New York Times* in January 2021, opinion columnist Michelle Goldberg wondered whether Joe Biden's presidency would be the first post-Reagan presidency. According to a theory that divides American political history into cycles or "political times," long-term political regimes in the United States are based on shared beliefs that change over time after exhausting their strength.¹ In this theoretical approach, presidents can either shape their action to "reconstruct" a political order or be "preemptive" of a new one. Even though the answer is still premature, in the wake of the Biden-Harris Administration several aspects concurred to the idea that a new political regime was already under construction, such as seismic economic changes due to the Covid-19 pandemic, realignments in the country's political map, cultural and social clashes over the racial, gender and class makeup of the country and the potential impact of huge federal relief programs, in antithesis with Reagan's small-government mantra. Drawing upon these critical adjustments, the call for our fifth monographic issue invites reflection on the "long cycles" of American history from a broad perspective. What can we learn about the next chapter of American history by looking back at past developments and conflicts in US society, culture, and politics?

The result is a multidisciplinary canvas, offering scholars in the humanities and social sciences many interconnected issues to be further developed, both in terms of research topics and methodologies. It is worthwhile to draw two relevant trajectories here. First, as the present issue shows, the paradigm of "long cycles" has proved to be a significant model for questioning the key features of American democracy, such as citizenship, presidential leadership, populism and religious engagement in politics. In particular, because of their normative and comparative approach, theories based on political time periods are likely to disclose their analytical potential when used to investigate fractures in the democratic consensus. Indeed, these theories put forward long-standing projections and also feed the analysis with a number of variables over time to be taken into account, encouraging a change of perspective. This permits an explanation of the second instance the articles in this issue point to, that is, the need for interdisciplinarity in approaching democratic challenges. The question

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1. Stephen Skowronek, *Presidential Leadership in Political Time: Reprise and Reappraisal* (Lawrence, KS: Kansas University Press, 2008).

goes far beyond the cross-disciplinarity inherent in the methodology of American Political Development, the subfield of political science to which Skowronek's seminal work belongs. As Bevitori and Marchi's essay demonstrates, the theoretical framework of historical cycles may even be an effective instrument in investigating political discourse through a proper linguistic approach that is based on quantitative and qualitative analysis. Moreover, the other essays assert that models of political times can enhance research in the fields and subfields of Cultural Studies, Comparative Politics, Public Law and Presidential Studies.

The study of social change and political representation in the "long cycles" of American history confirms that historiographical research and methodology can be flexible enough to open up a substantial dialogue with other fields in the humanities, as well as social and political sciences. Moreover, our fifth issue provides evidence that a historical perspective can fruitfully address the current crucibles of the American democracy. In this regard, we join the international scholarly endeavor which is attempting to tackle the most recent disruptive novelties concerning political language, electoral representation and illiberal politics, in the United States and beyond. In response to the twenty-first century's democratic crisis around the world, the scientific community has been strongly committed to multidisciplinary research regarding democratic innovations, civil society organization and electoral behavior. These topics have mainly attracted the interest of political scientists and sociologists who frequently integrate their findings in collaborative projects.² Nonetheless, we contend that this research could also benefit from an analysis of the past provided by historical scholarship since it allows grounding inferences into a specific socio-political context, considering the impact of the historical thickness. Essentially, that's what Historical sociology has already pursued for decades, especially when dealing with democratic innovations such as participatory and deliberative democracy.³ To mention another exemplary field, a similar research design is also well-established in Social Movement Studies, including archival inquiry along with sociological and political analysis of ongoing collective actions.⁴ Against the background of this wide academic debate, we believe that the essays collected in this issue hint at the expanding efficacy of historiography in cross-fertilization with other disciplines, based on a common interest in the past and present of US democracy.

Cinzia Bevitori and Anna Marchi's "Representations of citizenship in 230 years of American history. A diachronic corpus-assisted approach" uses the computational and qualitative analysis of *The State of the Union Diachronic Corpus (1790–2020)* in order to track the pace of change in presidential discourse on national citizenship. In addition, the aggregation of the authors' findings in historical cycles offers a deeper interpretation of the main trends of social change and stability in American history. Therefore, the corpus-assisted inquiry into presidential language highlights rhetorical constructs that are hidden to the naked-eye, which could respond to non-linguistic research focused on the relationship between citizenship and political discourse.

The theory of cyclical times elaborated by Philippe S. Gorsky in order to describe the political engagement of Christian conservatives in American history is applied in Chiara Migliori's analysis of the political stance of the 46th US President as a Christian leader. In "A Robin Hood Taking Over the Empire: Donald Trump's Revival Introduction," Migliori explores the strong alliance between Trump and his constituency of white Christian conservatives, looking at past and present dynamics. As the evangelical involvement in politics has followed recurrent cycles of growth and decline, especially during the twentieth century, Trump's figure not only led the last revival but was also able to drastically reshape the relationship between religion and politics.

In "The 'Second Wave' of Political Time Scholarship—and Beyond!," Curt Nichols offers a critical review of the literature influenced by Skowronek's book, *The Politics that Presidents Make*. Nichols finds out that the innovative model of political regimes has recently affected very different spheres of

2. See, for instance, Laurence Bherer, José Luis Fernández-Martínez, Patricia García Espín and Manuel Jiménez Sánchez, "The promise for democratic deepening: the effects of participatory processes in the interaction between civil society and local governments," *Journal of Civil Society*, 12(2016): 344–363.

3. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: Polity, 1989).

4. For a broad systematization of this approach, see Sidney G. Tarrow, *Power in Movement. Social Movements and Contentious Politics* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

interest as well as international studies, including the comparative research of institutionalized leadership in non-Western countries, the analysis of judicial power and the development of presidential discourse. Furthermore, the application of Skowronek's theory across different areas has led to enlarge and modify the theoretical implications of the theory itself.

In the column *Bringing History Back into Social and Political Sciences*, Mattia Diletti supports the use of historical perspective in inquiring populism and citizens' disengagement in Western democracies. After evaluating some popular stances in the academic and public debate, Diletti argues that it is time for political and social sciences to consider a comparative approach in American and European history in order to identify the uniqueness of each democratic system and its specific issues.

Through the broad scope of this issue, we can observe that by looking back at the past political regimes in the United States we have been led to foster inquiries far beyond American history. Once again, the present-day global ecosystem requires that scholars in humanities and social sciences reimagine area studies and research questions.

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