Over the years the phrase, American Political Development, has come to connote a genre of research that addresses a particular set of issues. The principle topic concerns how America’s governmental system shifted from a weak system (Frederick Engel observed that Marxism could not root in America because “there is no state there”) to a more or less resourceful state. The use of “state” in this description conveys information about the intellectual tradition that underlay much of the early research in APD – namely, European-centric statism. Over the past several decades, APD has become more inclusive. The research agenda of “new institutionalism” actually intersects with many traditional APD topics. (How states and how institutions develop the capacity to deal with uncertain environments, for example, are not that different.) We will devote a fair chunk of time familiarizing ourselves with this literature and considering where it might lead future research.

In a sense the course title is a misnomer, because we will consider how America’s past can be enlisted to address a broader set of concerns than those of traditional APD. One set of research questions consists of enlisting the 19th and early 20th centuries to test current theories of politics. A third research literature examines historical politics – beyond the APD agenda – theoretically interesting in its own right. Politicians in the early years of the republic had to figure out ways and create institutions to solve collective action problems. Modern study of American politics takes these solutions as givens. Perhaps a better title for our seminar is “Nineteenth Century Politics as a Research Field.” All of this topic involve history – a record of a chronological, narrative sequence of causal statements. We will also examine the methodological issues associated with historical narrative.

In selecting topics and readings, I have a couple of objectives. First, I want to familiarize you with the chief research topics in APD. We won’t cover any of them exhaustively, and some sessions will resemble the comp-preparing survey of class assigned literature and book reports. Second, I’d like to attract you to American history as a research field. Unlike much of modern congressional and electoral research, America’s 19th century remains an open research field where you can ask significant questions, rather than filling in the interstices of established analyses and arguments. With this latter objective in mind, I will pose a series of research questions for which I ask you to prepare research designs or arguments that indicate a direction of research. I will also throw data at you a la mud on the wall. There will be no exam, but there will be a 6-8 page research paper, which may extend one of the occasional assigned essays or actually broach analysis.

I suggest you purchase Skowronek’s, Building the New American State. We will read the historical sections of Aldrich’s Why Parties? Try amazon or even ebay for cheap used copies. The rest of assignments can be found on JSTOR or pdf copies will be placed in a course drop box.
Schedule and Syllabus
(DB refers to the Course Dropbox)

September 23. What APD is and is not.

Bensel, Richard. *Sectionalism and American Political Development…* chapter 3. DB


October 7. Methodology of Historical Analysis

Exercise assignment: fencing the plains. (sources: folder in DB)

October 7 - 14. Core APD

Discussion (10/14): fencing the plains
Skowronek, Steven. 1982. *Building the New American State* CUP.


Special case of post office:


Exercise assignment (10/7): the growth of the national government (folder in DB).

**October 21-28. The Transformation of Elections, Political Parties and Politicians**

Discussion (10/21): the growth of the national government


Discussion (10/28): the growth of government.
November 4. The Electoral System: Reforms, Critical Elections and Nationalization

Exercise assignment: electoral reforms and/or trends

Electoral reforms:


Critical elections:


Nationalization of Elections:


November 11. Congress: Careers and Elections


Discussion: electoral reforms and/or trends

**November 18. Congress: Institutional Development**

*(nota bene: this section still under development)*


**December 2. Presentations and wrap-up**