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What Americanists Don’t Know About American Politics

Abstract: This paper follows Noel’s 2010 attempt to introduce journalists and practitioners to findings from professional political science which are relevant to the interpretive challenge of American politics but with which they may not be familiar. It extends his work by focusing on comparative politics this time – the domestic politics of foreign countries – and it argues that American politics might be interpreted differently if it were analyzed through the lens of comparison.

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Ten Things We Know About Comparative Politics

In a recent issue of *The Forum*, political scientist Hans Noel (2010) laid out ten things that political scientists arguably know but that others may not. His aim was to help journalists and other observers to better understand what is going on in politics and so to better report on it. While Noel’s points were drawn mainly from American politics, here I add another ten taken more from the field of comparative politics, which studies the domestic politics of foreign countries.

Misconceptions about foreign polities arguably have different roots than those about America. While the misunderstandings of American politics are mainly driven by media frames and civics-class truisms, those in comparative politics typically derive from treating other political systems through the lens of American politics rather than in their own right. At the extreme, they derive from an implicit belief that if politics differs from the American template, it must in some way be inferior to it. Closer study, however, usually reveals that there is a logic to these recurring alternative arrangements.

This exercise is valuable not just because an understanding of foreign politics may help us to conduct better foreign policy, but also because it can shed light on the American political system. In the first place, we learn that some of the same goals that we pursue can be achieved in different ways, as they indeed are in other places. Further, we can see how different institutions may allow us to pursue different values than the ones that our system embodies. To put it provocatively, understanding American politics requires understanding places that are not America.
Don’t Wish for a Weak State

One of the mantras of the contemporary Tea Party and others throughout American history is that we need to keep government small. There are good arguments for this point of view (Friedman 1968). Very high taxes and an intrusive bureaucracy can hurt economic growth and limit individual liberty. But it is easy to forget that the state has many important functions, and carrying out these functions is not cheap. As Samuel Huntington (1968) famously put it, “The most important political distinction between countries concerns not their form of government, but their degree of government.”

This point becomes clearer when you start to look at politics in the developing world. While it is commonplace to criticize overly intrusive states in the third world – those whose overgrown bureaucracies choke off growth – the more dangerous failing is actually under-intrusive states. This problem is referred to as that of weak or failed states (Herbst 2000; Rotberg 2003). Consider a place like Somalia, which currently has virtually no state. This means not just that it cannot provide welfare services like healthcare, but that it cannot police crime, protect property rights, provide courts and justice, build roads, dispose of garbage, and establish public hygiene. And Somalia is not atypical in its failures. The problem of weak states is widespread, as the map in Figure 1 shows. Moreover, it is not a coincidence that several of these states are home to terrorists who can both elude weak police forces and buy off citizens by providing state-like services.

Once you start listing just the minimal goods that a state needs to provide, its value starts to become clearer and the cost of maintaining it more obvious. These basic public goods include a police force (to prevent violence and protect people’s property), an army (to protect from external enemies), a court system (to punish criminals and resolve contractual disputes), a public health system (to prevent the spread of disease), an election authority (because democracy protects rights), a tax collection agency (to collect the money to pay for these goods), and perhaps even schools, roads, and a communications infrastructure. Even these fairly basic goods necessary to protect fundamental rights are not cheap (Holmes and Sunstein 1999).

Yes, there are arguments that some of these functions can be performed by private organizations, and there are even better arguments that states have a tendency to expand into areas where they should not (like rent control laws) or use their powers for bad purposes (police forces that shake citizens down). But the best argument for a robust state is spending time in countries without one. Places like Somalia, Afghanistan, or Russia in the 1990s are testimony to this point. A weak state means not just living in fear of one’s neighbors or whatever bandits
Figure 1: Weak and Failed States.
might happen by, but in fear of disease, poverty, and a host of other ills. It is not a pretty picture.

**Democracy’s Roots Go Deep**

Because of America’s long democratic history, we tend to assume that every other country can and should have democracy. This is arguably a more justifiable attitude than its opposite – that democracy is a privilege of a select few – but it does fly in the face of considerable research in comparative politics which argues that stable, functioning democracy has deeper roots in history, economics, and society (Munck 2007, pp. 25–29).

The best evidence for this point is in Figure 2, which shows the percentage of countries that are democratic at different income levels. Vanishingly few rich countries are not democratic, and very few poor countries are. This is not to say that wealth causes democracy: there is still controversy about this relationship. Some would argue that wealth along with its correlates of education and equality does bring democracy (Lipset 1994; Boix 2003; Boix and Stokes 2003). Others assert instead that wealth does not bring democracy, but does help it to survive where it does emerge for whatever reason (Przeworski, Alvarez, and Cheibub

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**Figure 2** Democracy and Income.
2000). And still others argue that wealth and democracy are both consequences of a longer historical evolution (Acemoglu et al. 2008).

And this does not exhaust the potential causes of democracy which include factors like natural resource wealth (Ross 2012), civic participation (Putnam 1993), legacies of past regimes (Geddes 1999), ethnic diversity (Snyder 2000), and proper political institutions (Reynolds 2002). What is hard to deny is the many clear patterns we see in the distribution of stable democracies – not only their concentration in wealthy countries, but their regional concentration (and lack of concentration in places like the Middle East). Given the strength of these patterns, the idea that democracy can emerge anywhere simply by giving the right push or making the right choices – a process called crafting – has found little support. If anything, the US intervention in Iraq helped to confirm these fears.

This does not mean that nothing can be done. While we are on less firm ground in how exactly to promote democracy, a number of suggestive results have emerged. (For a skeptical take, see Carothers 1999.) In the first place, one could help build up the preconditions described earlier: higher income, reasonable economic equality, and inclusive institutions. There is also interesting work on the ways that oppositions can organize to topple authoritarian rulers when elections are held. This electoral model emphasizes unifying the opposition, running American-style campaigns, conducting alternative vote counts, and collaborating with civil society (Bunce and Wolchik 2011). Yet even the best efforts to create democracy require at least some fertile ground.

**Ancient Hatreds Are Not So Ancient**

When fighting in Yugoslavia started in the early 1990s and there were calls for US intervention, Colin Powell, then coming off a term as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, penned an editorial opinion in the *New York Times* arguing that any US intervention was futile because Croats, Serbs, and Bosniaks had hated each other for centuries (Powell 1992; see Kaplan 1994 for a more elaborate form of the argument). And it is easy enough to find evidence of horrific brutality between the nations of Yugoslavia, especially during World War II.

At the same time, a closer look shows that the history of relations between these peoples had many more peaceful than violent periods and that intermarriage among the different ethnicities was actually fairly common. More generally, the relative infrequency of violence between ethnic groups – most of the time they live in peace – may be the strongest proof that ancient hatreds do not inevitably
lead to conflict. One study found that only a tenth of one percent of potential ethnic conflicts turned into actual conflict (Fearon and Laitin 1996). While hatred may help an ethnic conflict along, it is far from necessary or sufficient.

Going deeper, nationalism – the belief in the distinctiveness of one's group that underlies these conflicts – is a relatively recent invention. It is only in the past two centuries or so – since the industrial revolution and the emergence of mass literacy – that people have come to identify as French, German, Japanese, or Indian (Gellner 1983; Anderson 1991). People had allegiances before then, but they tended to be localized, status-based (think feudalism), or more universal (Europeans once identified as Christians).

As Eugen Weber (1976) shows, before the French Revolution, only a minority of people living in France actually spoke French. The rest spoke regional languages or dialects that were mutually incomprehensible – Breton or Provençal, for example. It took considerable effort by politicians (along with artists and writers) to produce a French identity with purportedly ancient roots in heroes like Vercingetorix and Joan of Arc. Massive educational campaigns and a fair bit of coercion were necessary to turn “peasants into Frenchmen.”

In this sense, there is nothing natural or inevitable about the existence of ethnic groups, much less their hatred for each other. National identities are far from “primordial,” to use the technical term. They are constructed, and they can be manipulated. Hatred may accompany conflict, but it is typically a consequence rather than a cause. Once the killing starts, it is fairly understandable why people come to hate each other, but there is nothing permanent or immutable about that hatred.

Moving to the present day, detailed studies of ethnic conflicts in places like the former Yugoslavia or Rwanda show that the triggers for these conflicts were factors besides ethnic hatred (Horowitz 1985; Woodward 1995; Snyder 2000; Gagnon 2004; Straus 2006), and larger statistical studies confirm this (Fearon and Laitin 2003; Cederman, Weidmann, and Skrede 2011). Prime among these other factors is the collapse of the state (see point #1). When citizens can no longer rely on the police or army to protect them, they turn to their co-nationals for protection, leading to the creation of paramilitary organizations. And once these organizations commit acts of violence, it is easy to see how they can spiral out of control as each act creates fear and provokes a response.

Ethnic conflicts are often the most destructive sort of conflicts, because the combatants live in such close proximity to each other and so much is at stake. But their brutality does not mean that bruteness is their cause. There are logics, albeit grisly ones, to their emergence. Understanding those logics goes a long way toward preventing them.
The Dark Side of Checks and Balances

Ask an American about the main virtues in politics, and the standard answer will be that checks and balances preserve freedom by preventing majorities from oppressing minorities. Countries with fewer such constraints purportedly risk devolving into tyranny of the majority. There is some truth to this view, but what it leaves out are the costs.

The standard way political scientists think about checks and balances is in terms of veto players or veto points (Tsebelis 2002). A veto player is an actor or group of actors whose assent is necessary for a law to pass and whose refusal to give assent functions as a veto. A country with checks and balances is one with many veto players, and the US is indeed a prime example. For a bill to become a law, it must be approved by a majority in the House and a majority in the Senate (not to mention a filibuster-proof majority) while avoiding the veto of the president and a negative review from the Supreme Court.

One effect of all these veto players is the one mentioned before, majorities cannot rule by themselves. But the flip side is that minorities can veto policies, and the fact that many minorities can do this means that it is hard to pass any policies in the American system. To put it more generally, systems with a lot of veto players find it difficult to enact major changes in policy. If you ask why the US had to wait decades for civil rights laws or universal health insurance, the start of an answer is that minorities were able to veto these policies.

To imagine a different sort of system, consider the UK, at least until several recent changes. In the UK, a single party typically holds a majority in the House of Commons; that party elects a Prime Minister and government; and that government rules. By rule, I mean that virtually every bill which the government proposes – and no one else is really putting forward major bills – gets passed and enacted into law. The British Prime Minister has been called an elected dictator, and to some extent he or she is. The second house of the legislature, the House of Lords, is almost impotent, as is the monarch (the equivalent of our president), and judicial review has played only a small role.\(^1\) Even the opposition has little power.\(^2\) That is what a system with few veto players looks like, and it is not a descent into lawless barbarism. In fact, most British colonies (with the exception of the US) have or had a system like this.

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1. Party discipline is also very high. Representatives follow the orders of their party leaders.
2. The system is somewhat deceptive, because it appears that there is a powerful opposition, for example, when you watch Prime Minister’s Question Time on CSPAN. In fact, this is mainly a show, where the opposition tries to embarrass the government and sway public opinion but has little real power to hinder the government’s agenda.
Whether numerous veto players are a good or a bad thing is a matter of
debate. One way to think about it is to consider your assessment of the status quo.
If you like how things are going, lots of veto players are good because they lock it
in and make change difficult (though not impossible). If, on the other hand, you
would like things to change in whatever direction, then you might favor a more
streamlined system, one without so many checks and balances.

Third Parties Are Not a Matter of Political Will³

One of the obvious differences between countries is the number of relevant politi-
cal parties they have. In the US, it is two, but just look around the world and you
will find places like the UK with a third party in addition to a big two. Others
like Germany have a “big two” along with several smaller but significant parties.
Still others like the Netherlands or Belgium have a plethora of parties that might
include communists, anti-immigrant parties, linguistic and religious parties, and
even animal rights parties.

You may decry America’s small number of parties or praise it, but it is not
the virtues or vices of our citizens and politicians that have endowed us with a
two-party system. Even the richest and most committed activists would have a
hard time budging America away from the Democrats and the Republicans. What
is behind our two-party system is our electoral law. Though Americans do not
usually know its name, our style of elections is known variously as plurality rule,
single-member districts, or first-past-the-post. The idea is that we elect one repre-
sentative per district and whoever gets the most votes wins.

This type of system usually ends up as a battle between two candidates due
to a logic identified by French political scientist Maurice Duverger 1962. (For a
modern statement, see Cox 1997.)⁴ In the first place, the fact that the most votes
wins means that small parties (those who can claim less than, say, 30% of the
vote) rarely win. This is what Duverger called the mechanical effect of our rule.
But then there are strategic effects. Knowing that they cannot win, third-party
candidates drop out or join up with larger parties. Why invest the time and
money? Moreover, voters do not want to waste their vote on a party or candidate
sure to lose and so they avoid voting for third parties. These effects are known as

³ Noel 2010 makes a similar point. I add here an explanation of how extra parties form, the
second part of Duverger’s law.
⁴ For arguments that the electoral law is epiphenomenal and that parties cause the electoral
law, see Colomer (2005).
strategic entry and strategic voting. In short, the top two vote-getters have a large built-in advantage.\(^5\)

This is not all there is to it. The UK, India, and Canada have the same general system as the US, and all are home to multiple parties. Diversity is one of the reasons, particularly when minorities are concentrated. Québécoise can win as a third party because they are a majority in their home districts. Similar dynamics apply to India. An elected president, by contrast, reduces the number of parties as parties merge to capture this office. The UK is a bit of a mystery, especially because the Liberal Democrats receive such a low percentage of seats relative to votes. But more generally, the combination of plurality rule, an elected president, and a homogeneous society lead to a small number of parties (Ordeshook and Shvetsova 1994; Amorim Neto and Cox 1997; Clark and Golder 2006).

How, then, do you get extra parties? As just mentioned, religious, ethnic, or linguistic diversity certainly helps. But so does having an electoral law that limits these strategic incentives. A system of proportional representation (PR) tries to do this. The key is to elect multiple representatives, anywhere between three and a hundred, from each district. Then voters select among parties – it is hard to vote for individuals when you are electing a dozen of them at a time – and the percentage of votes a party receives can be matched up with its share of seats. A party that gets 20% of the vote would get 20% of the seats in the district, as opposed to zero in a plurality system. The formulas for doing this get complicated, but the principle is simple: elect multiple representatives for each district, vote for parties, and then give each party a share of the seats more or less equal to their vote share.

Bill Clinton famously called this system undemocratic – in throwing Lani Guinier, his nominee for Assistant Attorney General for Human Rights, under the bus – but it is not. It is simply different and has different effects. Making it easier to have a multi-party system is one.\(^6\) And it is relatively common around the world: you can find variants throughout Europe and Latin America, and it was once common in American cities. The key to more parties is not so much wanting them as changing the way they are elected.

\(^5\) It should be emphasized that this logic applies to individual districts, not to the system as a whole. Each district should feature contests between two parties, but that does not mean that they are the same two parties in each district.

\(^6\) Other effects include weakening the personal bond between representatives and their constituents, making politics more nationalized (rather than localized), and strengthening political parties.
Parliamentary Systems Are Not Hives of Instability

When Americans imagine political systems in foreign countries, their standard image is of Italy before its reforms in the 1990s. They see governments rising and falling and political leaders succeeding one another with startling rapidity. From 1972 to 1992, Italy had 21 different governments, each lasting an average of a single year. This is in striking contrast with the stately procession of presidents in America.

Such instability is then attributed to the parliamentary system of government, where the vote of no-confidence allows the legislature to bring down the government at will. In a parliamentary system, voters elect only a legislature, not an executive. The legislature then chooses a government which rules as long as it maintains the support of the legislature (for details see Gallagher, Laver, and Mair 2011). Governments can thus fall when they lose legislative support or confidence.

But the worry here is much exaggerated. Italy and some other countries have suffered from instability, but they are just one kind of parliamentary regime. The UK, Germany, and Sweden all feature parliamentary governments, and their systems are nearly as stable as the US (Sartori 1997; Laver and Schofield 1998). From 1979 to 2007, the UK had just three prime ministers. Figure 3 shows the wide variation in government durations. The difference is partially in the number of parties in these countries (see point #5). When you have just a few parties, one of them will often win a majority of seats in the legislature.

![Figure 3](image)

**Figure 3** Average Government Durations.
The majority party then elects a government and has little incentive to vote no confidence in it. After all, why would they vote against their own party? This is what we see in the UK.

Even in countries where no-confidence votes do sometimes succeed, they can be a source of good. Consider a situation where a government has failed. Perhaps it is incapable of dealing with an economic crisis, or its leader is embroiled in a personal scandal. Parliamentary systems have a simple way of resolving this problem: simply vote no confidence in the leader and choose a new one. American-style presidential systems do not have this luxury.\(^7\) Or consider the fact that parliamentary systems allow for coalition governments where multiple parties can share the cabinet, so that more opinions get heard.\(^8\) Yes, they may fight with each other, but more citizens feel that their voices are taken seriously.

Even systems like Italy that cycle through governments with far less cause may have some deeper stabilities. Despite having so many governments, many of them featured the same cast of characters. Giulio Andreotti served as Prime Minister three different times in addition to holding numerous other ministerial posts. The problem with Italy has been as much with its lack of turnover among an entrenched political class as with its frequent turnover. Parliamentary regimes are not flawless, but most function well and all of them do provide an important safety valve that the US lacks.

**It’s the Economy, Even Abroad, But Not Stupidly**

One of Noel’s points about elections in American is how decisive the economy is. With a bit of adaptation, this result carries over to the rest of the democratic world. When the economy is improving, incumbent parties do well, and where conditions are deteriorating, voters throw the bums out (Powell and Whitten 1993; Whitten and Palmer 1999; Hellwig and Samuels 2008; Duch and Stevenson 2010). A glance at the rest of the world, however, introduces some interesting nuances into this relatively simple story.

One is about political institutions. The simple model of elections as a referendum on the incumbent and the economy presumes that voters can pin the state of the economy on a particular incumbent. In the case of US presidential elections, this is relatively easy – though also probably unjustified, given a president’s

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\(^7\) Note that just about every presidency from Johnson to Bush II ended in failure and arguably should have been terminated prematurely.

\(^8\) This should be appealing to those who support bipartisanship.
limited influence on the economy. But consider cases where several parties compose the government, as is common in parliamentary systems (see point #6). One party may hold the prime ministership, but that position is not all-powerful and other parties may hold key posts like Finance, Foreign Affairs, or Interior. The principle of collective responsibility implies that all of the parties in government take responsibility for its decisions. Add in other institutions like a second house of the legislature, judicial review, federalism, and strong parliamentary committees, and it is no longer clear who should be punished for bad results.

Evidence backs up this point (Powell and Whitten 1993; Hellwig and Samuels 2008; Duch and Stevenson 2010). The relation between the vote for incumbents and the state of the economy is indeed conditional on the sort of institutions a country has. The more “clarity of responsibility,” as it has been termed, the stronger the relation. The more that responsibility is obscured, the less the economy affects the vote for the incumbent party or parties.

A second complication in the nature of the economic vote is what aspect of the economy matters and for whom. Students of American politics have shown that it is far more the general state of the economy (itself colored by partisan misperceptions) than the voter’s own pocketbook. But which part of the general economy matters: is it growth, unemployment, or inflation, to name just a few possibilities?

Cross-national studies have found a variety of results here. Different factors matter at different places and times. Though no general theory has yet united all of these results, one suggestive theory argues that different sorts of parties are held accountable for different outcomes (Powell and Whitten 1993). Left-wing parties who are committed to fighting poverty need to keep unemployment low to get reelected, while right-wing parties are punished for high inflation which is their bête noire. In short, the fundamentals matter across the world, but just as institutions and issues differ across nations, so does the way that the fundamentals matter.

There Is More Than One Way to Build a Prosperous Economy

The American economy is built on several pillars: a relatively free labor market, a large stock market through which corporations raise funds, a progressive income tax, weak labor unions, and a relatively small welfare state. These institutions have brought America considerable prosperity, though likely at costs for the less well-off. While the precise effects of different modes of economic organization
are still being debated (see Kenworthy 2010 for one such evaluation), what we do know is that there are several ways of organizing an economy that can lead to similarly successful though not identical results.

These other ways have gone under a number of different names, such as corporatism, Rhine capitalism, social or Christian democracy, or a social market economy (Shonfield 1968; Schmitter 1974; Esping-Andersen 1990; Zysman 1983; Hall and Soskice 2001).9 Recent work has emphasized how these systems differ from the US in their emphasis on coordination among firms and labor and has duly labeled them “coordinated market economies” (Hall and Soskice 2001).10 These analyses emphasize ways that firms cooperate with each other by setting up large-scale job-training programs and preserving these skills through welfare states, by sharing and transferring technology, and by relying on patient capital from banks and joint-holding (versus the impatient capital of stock markets).

The exemplar of this model is Germany, but other Western European economies and even Japan partake of some of these elements, and there is a logic (or actually several logics) to how all these elements fit together. More to the point here, it is hard to doubt the potential for success in this model. Germany’s ability to reconstruct itself after World War II and to continue to thrive even in globalized markets is clear.

Comparativists have also found that non-market institutions may be necessary for development in the modern world. The clearest cases of development in recent times – the Asian tigers who moved from the periphery to first-world status in a couple of generations – partake of some of these coordinated tools, though against a background of private ownership and free trade (Wade 1990; Evans 1995). State interventions can take a variety of forms – from heavy-handed ownership to more subtle methods of support and encouragement – and a key research agenda is showing which forms work best and under what conditions (Rodrik 2008). Even the World Bank has acknowledged some of the benefits of the so-called “developmental state” (World Bank 1997).

Whether the success of these models will continue or whether liberalized markets like the US will overtake more coordinated systems is much debated. So is the ability of poorer countries to replicate the success of Germany or the methods of the Asian tigers. But the past performance of this other capitalism

9 I ignore other ways based on central planning because of their evident failures in running advanced economies, but they have seen some success in developing states, though at considerable costs.

10 The US along with the UK, by contrast, are known as “liberal market economies.” There is a small growth industry in describing other so-called varieties of capitalism.
should give observers more than a moment’s pause and casts some doubt on the universality of the free-market model.

The US is Not Exceptional as You Think

In many respects, the US looks like an exceptional country. Compared to its developed peers, it is more religious. Its tax burden is lower, its welfare state smaller, and its level of inequality higher. It lacks a socialist or social democratic party. It is addicted to guns, the death penalty, and military aggression. It seems to be an outlier wherever one looks.11

Yet, broader comparisons suggest that the US is not so unusual. While the US may differ from its more developed peers in religiosity, economics, and crime, it is not usually an extreme outlier, and it fits quite well with many middle-income and developing countries. And in some unacknowledged ways, the US is very typical. Consider the consistently high degree of support of the American public for multilateralism and the UN, even if politicians do not share these views (Page and Bouton 2006). Or consider widespread opposition to inequality and the popularity of the main institutions of the welfare state, like Social Security and Medicare (Page and Shapiro 1992; Page and Jacobs 2009).

Further, many of the recent developments in US politics that seem to set us apart are not that unusual. Russell Dalton (2009) notes how trends like declining voter turnout, weakening partisanship, decreasing trust in government, and rising polarization are taken as distinctly American phenomena with distinctly American roots. Instead, he argues “that all these trends now occurring within the American public are also occurring in other advanced industrial democracies. These other democracies do not share our unique political history or institutional structures – so we share something in common that can be missed in nation-centric analyses” (Dalton 2009, p. 4).

And as Dalton points out, even when the US differs from other countries in its levels of participation or vote choice, many of the same factors are the key determinants of these outcomes across nations. The US simply scores high or low on these causes, but the processes are similar (Dalton 2008). Previous sections of this paper make this clear: the key role of the economy in elections, the effect of electoral laws on the number of parties, and the way that veto points (checks and balances) reduce legislative output. The US fits nicely in cross-national research on all these phenomena.

11 For a compendium of differences, see Karabel and Laurison 2011.
Beyond our behavior and attitudes, some have argued that the US is very different in its institutional forms. Dahl 2001 points out that no other established democracy features a presidential system and few continue to use our first-past-the-past electoral system or have such a malapportioned upper house. This may be true, but one could equally single out unusual institutions in other countries—ranked voting schemes in Ireland and Australia, a constructive vote of confidence in Germany, the dominance of a single party in Japan. More generally, larger attempts to characterize political systems do not single out the US. Arend Lijphart (1999, p. 248) places the US near the middle of his influential distinction between majoritarian systems—where bare majorities rule—and consensus politics—where everyone gets a say.12

It would be foolish to deny that the US is distinctive, but then again all countries are distinctive. That the US is consistently and substantially exceptional is harder to argue. Even harder to substantiate is that politics works differently in the US. Few scholars of comparative politics would hesitate to include America in their studies and for good reason (consider Pierson 1995 on the welfare state, Marx 1998 on racial policy, or Hall and Soskice 2001 on the economy). Because of its influence on world politics, every idiosyncrasy in US politics takes on outsized importance, but it is this influence itself that may be the most exceptional thing about the US.

What We Don’t Know

Like Noel, it is worth concluding on a note of humility. There is far more that we do not know about comparative politics than that we do know, a fact that is reflected in the judicious phrasings of the points here. The world is complicated and we are far from understanding its diversity. Though we do sometimes know what does not matter—note the negative phrasings above—we still do not know the causes of some of the most important phenomena in comparative politics including:

– Why some states are strong and others are weak.
– Why democracy emerges in some places but not others.
– Why some countries are wracked by civil wars but others are not.
– What effect politics has on the economy.

12 Powell (2000) finds a similar result. Expanding the comparison to middle-income states makes the US look even more typical.
These are the fundamental questions of our field, and while there are theories to explain all of them, it is hard to say that we have reached a consensus on any.

Even a few results that until recently were considered truisms (and were included in earlier versions of this paper) have been called into question. A telling example is the resource curse, the claim that states rich in natural resources like oil and diamonds tend to be less democratic than similar states without these resources. This was one of the most exciting theories of the 1990s and 2000s (Karl 1997; Ross 2001). It not only gave a persuasive and empirically supported explanation for one of the main patterns in democracy, the dearth of democracy in the Middle East and Africa, but it also provided credible mechanisms – no representation without taxation – and allowed scholars to move away from patronizing theories of religious and cultural difference.

Unfortunately, this consensus has lost a bit of its luster. Several scholars have found the curse to be more contingent than universal (Jones Luong and Weinthal 2001; Dunning 2008), and others have challenged it altogether (Haber and Menaldo 2011), though it has also been spiritedly defended (Ross 2012). Like many results in political science, including most mentioned above, this one may depend on specific contextual factors, which should sound a word of caution for those looking for clear and bright advice on foreign policy. Progress is being made, but answers will not come over night.

**Conclusion**

One reaction to seeing political and economic systems that differ from the US is to label them as flawed or degenerate versions of the American model. In some cases, this may be true. But there is usually a set of reasons underlying these systems and a logic to their workings. This suggests circumspection in denouncing other polities and advocating that they be changed.

Alternative institutions typically produce different outcomes. Depending on your values, these outcomes can be better or worse, though they are usually some combination of the two. What this article has tried to show is that before judging other systems, it is worth trying to understand them. Not only do we learn that there are other ways of organizing a modern polity, but there are other values that politics can pursue, values that can add to our own politics.
References


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