

Preface

What is political history? The answer may seem obvious. In everyday language, “politics” in a democratic nation like the United States is the subject of who gets elected to office and what they do with the powers granted to them by voters, laws, and constitutions. It is an endless contest of speech making, lawmaking, fund-raising, and negotiating in which ambitious actors spend their lives struggling to come out on top.

This definition may seem like common sense, but it does not capture what most political historians actually do. Many authors who engage in the serious study of past politics try to understand the larger forces that propel changes in governments, laws, and campaigns. The most influential historians, in particular, have always framed the narrative of legislative give-and-take and winning and losing office within a context of grand historical themes and developments. In the 1890s, Frederick Jackson Turner argued that the frontier experience shaped American democracy. For him, regional identities and cultures drove political development. Early in the twentieth century, Charles and Mary Beard contended that the clash of economic interests was at the root of every turning point in U.S. history—from the drafting of the Constitution to the Civil War. At mid-century, Richard Hofstadter used the psychological concept of “status anxiety” to explain the fervor of both Populist and Progressive reformers. In recent decades, leading scholars have sought to illuminate evolving tensions within the body politic by focusing on intersecting differences of religion and cultural taste, race and ethnicity, gender and class.

The Concise Princeton Encyclopedia of American Political History also assumes an expansive definition of politics: the meaning and uses of power in the public sphere and the competition to gain that power. The word *politics* derives from the Greek word for “citizen,” and the rights, powers, and obligations of citizens and their governments have been at the core of the subject since the days of Aristotle, Plato, and Herodotus.

Another tradition has been with us since the building of the Acropolis: history is a constant debate. In this spirit, our contributors offer interpretations of their topics, not merely a factual record or a summary of views held by others. Each article ends with a bibliography meant to guide the reader to some of the most significant works on that topic.

The study of politics in the United States has featured several interpretive approaches since the first serious histories of the subject were published in the middle of the nineteenth century. First, at a time when universities were just beginning to train historians, such self-taught, eloquent writers as George

Bancroft and Henry Adams wrote multivolume narratives of presidents and diplomats. Their prose was often vivid, and their judgments had a stern, moralizing flavor.

By the early twentieth century, such grand personal works were being supplanted by a rigorously empirical approach. This was a style of history pioneered by disciples of the German academic scholar Leopold von Ranke, who declared that the past should be studied “as it really was.” Rankean scholars wrote careful monographs which piled fact upon fact about such subjects as the decisions that led to independence and the making of new state constitutions. They believed a “scientific” approach could produce a political history with the opinions of the historian left out.

At the same time, however, a new group known as the “progressive” historians was garnering controversy and a large readership outside academia as well as among scholars. Such leading progressives as Turner, the Beards, and Vernon Parrington described a long-standing division between, on the one hand, the makers of elite, urban culture and big business and, on the other hand, small farmers and self-taught, self-made men from rural areas and the frontier. These historians were sympathetic toward the reform movements of their day—from the Populists in the 1890s to the New Dealers of the 1930s—which portrayed themselves as fighting for “the people.”

By the 1940s, a reaction to the progressive scholars was gathering force. Such historians as David Potter, Daniel Boorstin, and the political scientist Louis Hartz joined Hofstadter in arguing that politics in the United States had long been characterized more by a consensus of values than by a conflict over economic interests. Such “counterprogressive” scholars argued that most Americans had always embraced liberal capitalism and rejected any politicians and movements that aimed to do more than tinker with the existing system.

This sober, often ironic sensibility was challenged head-on in the late 1960s by historians—most of them young—who were inspired by contemporary movements for African American freedom, feminism, and against the war in Vietnam. These “New Left” scholars revived the progressive emphasis on sharp, ongoing conflict but located its wellsprings among workers, racial and ethnic minorities, and women—groups that had previously received little attention from political historians. Influential scholars like Eric Foner, Gerda Lerner, Nathan Huggins, Eugene Genovese, and Alan Brinkley embedded their narratives of power in a rich context of class relations, racial identities, and cultural assumptions. Arguing that ordinary people were as much agents of change as were national politicians and government officials helped to democratize understanding of the past, even as it deemphasized such

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durable institutions as the courts, Congress, and the major political parties.

More recently, an increasing number of scholars have turned away from focusing on American politics in isolation from similar developments occurring elsewhere in the world. Their “transnational” perspective challenges patriotic vanities by chipping away at the notion that the United States ever stood apart from ideas and social movements that shook other lands and peoples. Thomas Bender interprets the North’s victory in the Civil War as producing a newly potent national state much like those emerging at the same time in Japan, Italy, Argentina, and Germany. Similarly, Daniel Rodgers describes how American reformers in the early twentieth century tried to apply policy ideas they had picked up on visits with fellow progressives and moderate socialists in Europe.

Whatever the individual approach, nearly every contemporary historian implicitly applies a broad definition of politics to her or his work. Historians are interested not only in such traditional topics as presidents, bureaucratic institutions, and constitutions but also in popular ideology and consciousness, social movements, war, education, crime, sexuality, and the reciprocal influence of mass culture on political thinking and behavior. At the same time, scholars in fields outside of history—especially in political science and law—have demonstrated a growing interest in the American past. Meanwhile, best-seller lists routinely include one or more skillful narratives about past presidents, diplomacy, and the politics of war. This is an exciting time to be a political historian in the United States.

The Concise Princeton Encyclopedia of American Political History is an abridged version of *The Princeton Encyclopedia of American Political History*, a two-volume work published in 2010. The *Concise* edition collects 150 articles (drawn from 187 in the original encyclopedia) in a single, portable volume. Although shorter and more streamlined than the parent work, the *Concise* preserves the editors’ broad definition of American political history, with essays on traditional topics as well as those that exemplify the creative changes that mark the discipline.

Periods

Which issues, parties, institutions, events, and leaders were dominant in different spans of time? In chronological order, these essays include the era of a new republic (1789–1827), the Jacksonian era (1828–45), sectional conflict and secession (1845–65), Reconstruction (1865–77), the Gilded Age (1870s–90s), progressivism and the Progressive Era (1890s–1920), the conservative interregnum (1920–32), the New Deal Era (1933–52), the era of consensus (1952–64), the era of confrontation and decline (1964–80), and the conservative ascendancy (1980–2004). The essays provide an overview of pivotal elections, political developments, policies, and policy makers, and the rise and fall of major party coalitions.

Institutions

This category includes the presidency, the House of Representatives, the Senate, and the Supreme Court; as well as the cabinet departments; the Electoral College; local, state, and territorial governments; and civil service. But it also includes such nongovernmental institutions as party nominating conventions, think tanks, interest groups, and public opinion polls, as well as such topics as citizenship, whose legal and political history is critical to understanding the politics of ethnicity, immigration, and gender.

Movements

Mass movements have had a major impact on political change in the United States. This category includes both long-lived movements that still exist—such as labor and pacifism—and ones of great historical significance that now exist only in memory, such as abolitionism and Prohibition.

Major Political Parties

This category includes lengthy articles on the Democrats and Republicans in different periods as well as shorter essays about defunct major parties, such as the Federalists and Whigs. The essays discuss the impact of key elections, leaders, events, and social changes on the fortunes and evolution of these organizations whose competition has done much to structure the political order from the 1850s to the present.

Ideas and Philosophies

This category includes such hotly contested and undeniably significant concepts as conservatism, liberalism, republicanism, radicalism, Americanism, feminism, and democracy. It also includes articles about how religion has influenced politics and vice versa.

War and Foreign Policy

The rest of the world has been a major influence on the development of the American polity and on a variety of related subjects—from the growth of the military, to the Fourteenth Amendment, to the rise of the African American freedom movement in the 1940s and 1950s. The essays about the nation’s wars discuss the effect of military operations on domestic debate and policy as well as the role of military leaders and battles in shaping electoral outcomes.

Founding Documents

This category includes the Articles of Confederation as well as the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the initial amendments to it, the Bill of Rights. Articles in this category discuss the genesis of these documents as well as debates about their meaning and application over the next two centuries and beyond.

Regions

In wide-ranging essays, authors focus on the major issues, dominant institutions, and pivotal actors in the politics of New England, the Middle Atlantic,

the South since the end of Reconstruction, the Midwest, the Great Plains, the Rocky Mountains, the Pacific Coast, and Alaska and Hawai'i. These contributions examine how the expansionist, regionally diverse character of U.S. history has shaped its political evolution.

Issues

This category includes subjects and actors whose significance has been perennial in U.S. history, as in the political history of every modern nation: the economy (banking policy, agrarian politics, consumers, taxation, transportation), cities and suburbs, class and crime. These are the “issues” that—since the beginning of the republic—politicians, movements, and voters have debated, and that have spurred major pieces of legislation and court rulings.

The best political histories teach readers a good deal that is new to them but do so in clear, direct, evocative prose. This work is intended to help readers at all levels of knowledge to understand patterns and connections in U.S. history, from its colonial origins to the present day, and to serve as a first step to further research. All our contributors

combine expertise with an ability to write for a broad audience.

We hope you find this concise encyclopedia both instructive and a pleasure to read.

Recommended Reading

For excellent surveys of historical scholarship about U.S. politics, see Richard J. Jensen, “Historiography of American Political History,” in *Encyclopedia of American Political History*, edited by Jack P. Greene (1984), 1–25; Meg Jacobs and Julian E. Zelizer, “The Democratic Experiment: New Directions in American Political History,” in *The Democratic Experiment: New Directions in American Political History*, edited by Meg Jacobs, William J. Novak, and Julian E. Zelizer (2003), 1–19; Sean Wilentz, “American Political Histories,” *OAH Magazine of History* (April 2007), 23–27. For excellent essays on significant individuals, see *American National Biography* (2002). The latter is also available online (with a subscription). A bracing history of the historical profession in the United States is Peter Novick’s *That Noble Dream* (1989).

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