

Suggested Guidelines for Periodization

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For those who would analyze American political history by breaking it into periods, here are five suggested guidelines:

(1) *For the most part, don't do it.* The presumption should be against trying to do it. That is for at least three reasons. First, there is the familiar hazard that attaches to any chunking of time, as with “the Renaissance,” or “the nineteenth century,” or “the New Deal era.” That is, such segmenting can help to sustain frozen ways of thinking that oversystematize the past in particular ways and ward off fresh insights.

Second, a special consideration arises in the American case. In the political sphere, there is a great deal of sameness in American history. In Samuel P. Huntington's words, the United States enjoys “one of the world's more antique polities.” Dynamic as this country may be in countless ways, its basic political institutions date to the eighteenth century or earlier: “With a few exceptions, such as a handful of colleges and churches, the oldest institutions in American society are governmental institutions.”¹ That makes for an often surprising sameness or continuity in the way these institutions operate. Examine the enactment of the Jay Treaty in 1795–96, for example, and you will be reminded of the enactment of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1993. Both junctures featured a familiar pattern of executive initiative, stiff opposition, extended public debate, congressional sluggishness, both sides hustling for support back in the states and districts, and ultimate roll-call victories in which an executive-led cross-party coalition “rolled” a House majority party.² In studying, say, Russia

1. Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968), 129, 133.

2. For an account of the enactment of the Jay Treaty, see Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick, *The Age of Federalism: The Early American Republic, 1788–1800* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 425–49.

or Germany, there is good prima facie reason to chunk the political history. There is less reason in the case of the United States.

Third, periodization risks a loss of analytic leverage. Very often there is virtue in large numbers. In the case of a polity enjoying as long a continuous existence as the United States, a marvelous opportunity for leverage through large numbers arises. Rather than rushing to chunk the history, we should ordinarily take advantage of the many individual units or episodes of this, that, or another that have piled up during the two centuries of history (or large spans of it) to generalize about the whole, or where possible to mobilize independent variables to explain aspects of the whole. That strategy will not always work or make sense, but it is available and it deserves a fair shake. It is of course a familiar strategy. We had seen it in the study of topics as various as economic voting,³ party success in presidential elections,⁴ midterm elections,⁵ voter turnout,⁶ presidential vetoes,⁷ executive orders,⁸ congressional roll-call voting,⁹ congressional seniority violations,¹⁰ congressional appropriations,¹¹ changes in congressional institutions,¹² national lawmaking,¹³ tariff rates,¹⁴ income tax rates,¹⁵ welfare-state

3. See, for example, D. Roderick Kiewiet and Michael Udell, "Twenty-Five Years after Kramer: An Assessment of Economic Retrospective Voting Based upon Improved Estimates of Income and Unemployment," *Economics and Politics* 10 (1998): 219–48. This and the succeeding references in this paragraph are meant to be representative of families of scholarship.

4. Daniel J. Gans, "Persistence of Party Success in American Presidential Elections," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 16 (1985): 221–37.

5. Robert S. Erikson, "The Puzzle of Midterm Loss," *Journal of Politics* 50 (1988), 1011–29; Andrew Busch, *Horses in Midstream: U.S. Midterm Elections and Their Consequences, 1894–1998* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1999).

6. Walter Dean Burnham, "The Changing Shape of the American Political Universe," *American Political Science Review* 59 (1965): 7–28; Charles A. Kromkowski, "Why Has Voter Turnout Declined? Because It Has Not: American Electoral Turnout Rates, 1776–2001," paper presented at the 2001 Conference of the Midwest Political Science Association.

7. Jong Lee, "Presidential Vetoes from Washington to Nixon," *Journal of Politics* 37 (1975): 522–46.

8. Kenneth R. Mayer, *With the Stroke of a Pen: Executive Orders and Presidential Power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

9. Keith T. Poole and Howard Rosenthal, *Congress: A Politico-Economic History of Roll Call Voting* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

10. Nelson W. Polsby, Miriam Gallaher, and Barry W. Rundquist, "The Growth of the Seniority System in the House of Representatives," *American Political Science Review* 63 (1969): 787–807.

11. D. Roderick Kiewiet and Mathew D. McCubbins, *The Logic of Delegation: Congressional Parties and the Appropriations Process* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

12. Eric Schickler, *Disjointed Pluralism: Institutional Innovation and the Development of the U.S. Congress* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

13. David R. Mayhew, *Divided We Govern: Party Control, Lawmaking, and Investigations, 1946–1990* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991).

14. John Mark Hansen, "Taxation and the Political Economy of the Tariff," *International Organization* 44 (1990): 527–51.

15. John L. Campbell and Michael Patrick Allen, "The Political Economy of Revenue Extraction in the Modern State: A Time-Series Analysis of U.S. Income Taxes, 1916–1986," *Social Forces* 72 (1994): 643–69.

benefits,¹⁶ the peace dividend after wars,¹⁷ and political assassinations.¹⁸ There is no reason to believe that studies like these would have been improved, and good reason to believe they would have been vitiated, by analytic rushes to judgment about “eras.”

That having been said, it is indeed additionally true that history sometimes invites joints to cut at and thus a cautious designation or “eras” or “periods” or “regimes.” What might be the guidelines for cutting and periodizing?

(2) *Above all, don't try to impose, or expect to find, regular cycles of anything.* That is a bit too strong. Regular cycles exist in the sense that Independence Day comes every July, congressional elections come every second November, a national census comes every decade, and so on. However, beyond the realm of calendrical patterns like these, to search for cyclical regularities in American history is to risk entering a numerological fantasy land. There is no good reason to enter it. There is too much contingency in politics and history. Wars, depressions, disasters, assassinations, fads, fancies, emergent circumstances, and leadership idiosyncrasies can and do overwhelm any systemic tendencies toward cyclical regularities.¹⁹

(3) *If you do aim for or come to accommodate a pattern of periodization, do so by way of clear, exhaustively stated, replicable, and if possible simple, decision rules.* Otherwise, there is no way for an independent observer to gauge your periodization scheme against other people's periodization schemes. Replicability is an imperative that extends to all of political science. There shouldn't be any exemption from it. As it happens, some would-be periodizers do a model job of crafting and presenting their decision rules. One example is Jerome M. Clubb, William H. Flanigan, and Nancy H. Zingale in their work on electoral realignments.²⁰ Regardless of what you may think of electoral realignments, these authors present a very clear delineation of what one of those alleged junctures might look like. Another example is John Gerring in his work on American party ideologies.²¹ Gerring's coding exercise required a lot of judgments and is complex, yet one comes away from his work reasonably well

16. Robert X. Browning, *Politics and Social Welfare Policy in the United States* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1986).

17. Hugh Rockoff, “The Peace Dividend in Historical Perspective,” *American Economic Review* 88 (1998): 46–50.

18. James W. Clarke, “American Assassins: An Alternative Typology,” *British Journal of Political Science* 11 (1981): 81–104.

19. On this subject see, for example, David R. Mayhew, “Wars and American Politics,” forthcoming in *Perspectives on Politics*; Mayhew, “Events as Causes: The Case of American Politics,” paper presented at conference on “Contingency and Politics,” Yale University, December 3–4, 2004.

20. Jerome M. Clubb, William H. Flanigan, and Nancy H. Zingale, *Partisan Realignment: Voters, Parties, and Government in American History* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1980).

21. John Gerring, *Party Ideologies in America, 1828–1996* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

satisfied that anyone poring over the same evidence would come up with something like the same ideological eras.

(4) *Let periodization emerge from the data rather than be imposed on it.* It is always nice to see surprises. A periodizing enterprise should be a voyage of discovery, not a dogged ratification of what we already thought—particularly if what we already thought was a tired conventional wisdom. Fresh findings do sometimes surface. In Keith T. Poole and Howard Rosenthal's work on congressional roll calls, it is a revealing result that the breakpoints occurred in the 1820s and 1850s—and just at those times. In Gerring's work on party ideologies, it is a thought-provoking result that the 20th-century breakpoints occurred in the 1920s and around 1950. What are we to make of that? In reading James W. Ceaser's work on presidential nominating, one comes away satisfied that he has made a good fresh case by cutting at the right joints in the 1830s and 1910s.²²

(5) *Disaggregate by subject realm.* That is, don't expect that whatever periodizations you come up with regarding various particular political phenomena will credibly bundle together into one super-periodization that encompasses all phenomena. Very likely they won't. It can cloud the mind to force them to do so. Be especially wary of large vehicles like "the antebellum era," "the Progressive era," or "the New Deal era." If periodization is to be undertaken at all, disaggregation by subject area can often provide better clarity, validity, and insight. Consider, for example, the broad realm of "policy regimes." In the area of welfare-state provision, we might identify a sequence of regimes that includes a late-nineteenth-century veterans' benefits regime,²³ a Social Security regime beginning in 1935,²⁴ and a Medicare regime beginning in 1965.²⁵ That would be one plausible way to periodize. But those spans and dates would make no sense in the area of, say, federal revenue policy, where, apart from Social Security payroll withholding, the major long-lasting taxation regimes have originated in the Civil War in the 1860s, World War I in the 1910s, and World War II in the 1940s.²⁶ Yet another periodization would be needed for perhaps the most underaddressed of major American policy areas, immigration. There, we might identify an East Asian exclusion regime starting in the 1880s, a general exclusion regime brought on by a series of enactments in 1917, 1921, and 1924, and an

22. James W. Ceaser, *Presidential Selection: Theory and Development* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979).

23. Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

24. Martha Derthick, *Policymaking for Social Security* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1979).

25. Jonathan Oberlander, *The Political Life of Medicare* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

26. W. Elliot Brownlee, "Tax Regimes, National Crises, and State-Building in America," chapter 2 in Brownlee (ed.), *Funding the Modern American State, 1941–1995* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

open-door regime originating in 1965.²⁷ It would seem the beginning of wisdom to treat sequences of policy regimes like these putative welfare-state, revenue, and immigration ones in the form they have individually happened rather than to try to squish them into super-periodizations.

The same argument applies in other realms. In Gerring's reckoning, American ideologies have metamorphosed on their own unique schedule. In Clubb, Flanigan, and Zingale's account, electoral coalitional patterns seems to have gotten shaken up, for the most part, just after major depressions and wars.²⁸ There is a case that certain "program regimes"—that is, bundles of interrelated issues that caught public attention for a generation or so—originated in wars. Examples are the "American System" featuring proposals for a protective tariff, a national banking system, and internal improvements that grew out of the War of 1812 and the "Fair Deal" featuring proposals regarding civil rights, national health insurance, federal aid education, full employment policy, and federal housing policy that seems to have grown out of World War II.²⁹ In these and other areas, if periodization is to be undertaken at all disaggregation seems to be the best strategy.

27. Daniel J. Tichenor, *Dividing Lines: The Politics of Immigration Control in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

28. Clubb, Flanigan, and Zingale, *Partisan Realignment*, 92–93.

29. Mayhew, "Wars and American Politics."