White Riot: Race, Institutions, and the 2016 US Election[*]

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April 26, 2018

Americanist political science now occupies a central place in American public discourse. As journalists geared up for the 2016 election, political scientists secured writing positions at widely read journalistic outlets, commented on debates as they took place, and situated the events of the campaign in the context of political science theory. And yet, Americanist political science emerged from this encounter with prominence and relevance not triumphant, but battered. Political scientists believed that Donald J. Trump would not win the primary election, and had no chance at competing in the general election, much less winning it. They disagreed about how to evaluate Trump himself: was he an ideological moderate? Was he a credible candidate? Would his nomination doom the Republican party?

As Weaver and Soss argue, our subfield has approached the study of American politics from a very particular perspective: focused on "electoral-representative processes, citizen opinion and participation, politics within and among branches of national government, and policy struggles among organized interest groups" (for contrasts, see e.g., (Allen and Cohen, 2015; Harris, 2014)).

In the modern American Politics subfield, liberal-democratic models frame most discussions of civic and political inequalities. The mainstream of the field – and especially the aspects of the field most central to the public discussion – focuses on what Pierson and Hacker call electoral spectacle: campaigns, elections, voter behavior, and partisanship (Hacker and Pierson, 2011).

Although these are important subjects of study, the 2016 election has revealed dynamics that Americanist political science is ill-equipped to address while continuing to operate under the assumption that the state's liberal-democratic character is assured.

What aspects of American electoral institutions allowed Donald Trump, a primary candidate whom political scientists largely considered a joke and who violated many significant informal norms about presidential campaigns, to win the presidency? Did those norm violations, and the public and partisan response to them, arise from existing legitimacy issues in American politics? Did the party and the electoral system reward or merely tolerate them? What are the consequences of a presidency built on norm violations, and promising many more? Are the social and political divisions that led to Trump's election new, or do they reflect deeper coalitional trends in American politics?

The mainstream of the discipline has avoided questions about whether our political institutions are robust, legitimate, and democratic. There are strains of Americanist political science which focus on these questions, including important scholarship in American political development and racial and ethnic politics. But these areas of study are typically separated from the disciplinary mainstream.

What can we learn from this election? How can the unexpected and troubling events of the 2016 primary and general elections shed light on American politics, and on how we as a discipline seek knowledge about the US political system? Americanists risk additional missteps if they continue to restrict their analytic focus to electoral-representative processes, avoid seriously investigating the robustness of informal and formal democratic institutions, and do not place race at the center of

analyses of American politics.

I argue that this election highlights two major – and closely related – gaps in the American politics subfield. First, Americanists who study contemporary politics have avoided questions about whether institutions are durable, in effect treating state legitimacy as a solved problem. In fact, as this election shows, institutions are more fragile, and questions about durability more important, than Americanists tend to assume.

In particular, this year saw many political parties, candidates, and elites violate informal norms which support the formal institutions of US democracy: the Senators from the opposition party refused to vote on a sitting president's Supreme Court nominee, a political party nominated a candidate with no political experience who proceeded to violate informal discursive norms against overtly racist statements and refused to follow informal norms about tax-related transparency, and the security services intervened against a major party candidate for president. As Helmke and Levitsky argue, these informal norms play key roles in determining the consequences of formal institutions of governance (Helmke and Levitsky, 2006). As I argue in more detail later, their decline – and the lack of electoral punishment for their decline – suggests a threat to the continued democraticness and legitimacy of those institutions.

Second, the 2016 election shows that ethnic and racial politics are central, not peripheral, to American politics - and should be central to Americanist political science as well. Trump's success in appealing to rural white voters with an explicitly ethnonationalist stance makes clear that ethnic politics are not solely or even primarily the property of ethnoracial minorities. Rather, they play a central role in most important developments in American politics.

While these two issues initially appear separate, they actually inform each other. The central stream of inquiry in Americanist political science is separated from the study of ethnic and racial minorities, the study of comparative politics, and the study of American political history. These divisions mean that our theories of party activity, political behavior, the presidency, and Congress

largely draw from a compressed set of observations, and focus on a compressed set of questions. Americanists cannot adequately address the questions raised by the 2016 election if these divisions remain in place. As Soss and Weaver argue, our subfield focuses largely on questions which assume the liberal-democratic character of the state is assured. In addressing questions about inequality, this work focuses largely on exclusion, marginalization, and participation – not on the democratic character of the institutions in which groups participate.

There have been and continue to be major threats to US democratic institutions in the past and in local aspects of the present, and there have been multiple groups in the United States for whom the legitimacy of the federal government has been in question for many years. When we see threats that the security services or the criminal justice system will be deployed against political figures, the historical and contemporary treatment of Black civil rights activists provides important context. The security services threatened U.S. democratic institutions by intervening in American politics to discredit civil rights activists and undermine the Black Panther Party. Despite the very high per capita income of the United States, many subgroups of Americans live in intense poverty, with life outcomes (child mortality, life expectancy, homicide risk, and incarceration rate) on par with some of the poorest people in the world (Shaefer, Wu and Edin, 2016). Miller describes the double exposure of African Americans to state and individual violence as "localized, racialized... state failure" (Miller, 2016).

Understanding the political environment we now face calls for broader integration within the field of American politics, as well as within political science as a whole (and between political science and other disciplines, such as sociology, anthropology, and history). Expanding the mainstream of American politics to include both the study of ethnoracial politics and the study of historical American politics will improve our analysis of institutional failures in major-party electoral competition in the United States. When the FBI director intervened in the presidential election by releasing information under pressure from a field office (Bertrand, 2016), we might seek histor-

ical examples of the security services intervening in US politics – for example, COINTELPRO, an FBI program aimed at surveilling and discrediting civil rights activists in the 1950s and 1960s (Bloom and Martin, 2013; Garrow, 1981). Intervening against a major party candidate with leaked information about investigations is, of course, different from intervening against a black nationalist political party using police raids and informants. But the comparison is nonetheless an analytically fruitful one.

Moreover, the comparative politics literature offers robust theoretical frames and comparative studies of institutional legitimacy. In particular, comparativists have developed important theories of the sources of institutional legitimacy, and the relationship between informal norms and formal institutions. Over the last several decades, American politics has seen critical changes in the use of informal norms which undermine both democratic responsiveness and performance – two key sources of state legitimacy. Comparative politics also offers fruitful ways to think about ethnoracial politics, including the political demands of dominant groups.

The remainder of this essay proceeds in two parts. I consider the fragility of US political institutions and the interaction between institutions and ethnoracial politics, which played a central role the 2016 presidential election. Specifically, I enumerate violations of U.S. institutional norms that took place throughout the election. I then consider: Do these changes pose a major threat, or are they a minor blip in an otherwise stable situation? The election has highlighted a need for new lenses through which to answer these questions and consider the trajectory of American democratic liberalism. To fill this gap, I discuss the value of comparativist political science literatures in assessing the fragility and legitimacy of institutions in the United States, then argue that understanding the ways that democratic institutions have failed "race-class subjugated communities offer opportunities for comparison to current threats (Soss and Weaver, 2017).

In the second, I discuss the interaction between institutional legitimacy and ethnoracial politics. Despite some excellent exceptions, the political preferences of white Americans are too often

treated as race neutral rather than racialized. Trumps rise to prominence cannot be understood without placing white racial demands in a central role.

1 Institutional Legitimacy

Observers have been impressed with the robustness of American democratic institutions, and their survival over the challenges of time, war, and political conflict. "Western industrialized state nations, during the post-Westphalian era, have become so well established that their legitimacy is almost assured regardless of their constitutional design, and this is especially true for the United States" (Riggs, 1997). Scholars have developed strong theories of the historical development of the American state. And yet, in their study of contemporary American politics, Americanists have overlooked signs of fragility in these modern institutions. In this section, I compare American institutions to similar institutions across Latin America and elsewhere to illuminate their vulnerabilities.

In two of the last five US presidential elections, the candidate who received the most votes lost the election, raising questions about the democratic representativeness of the American presidency. Filibusters have become routine, making it nearly impossible to pass legislation through Congress without the support of 60 Senators; party polarization is high, no party holds a 60-vote majority, so the Senate is largely gridlocked. Senate-confirmed positions have become harder and harder to fill, as the use of procedural delays and obstructions has expanded to almost all Senate business (Joseph O'Connell, 2015). Recent reports from the Electoral Integrity Project score many US state election practices poorly, "with the United States scoring the worst in electoral integrity among similar Western democracies" (Norris, Garnett and Grömping, 2016).

The winner of the 2016 election violated many informal norms that were universally followed in other recent US presidential elections: he refused to release his tax returns (Barstow et al., 2016); promised to jail his opponent (Savage, 2016); encouraged the use of violence by his supporters

(Sullivan and Stanley-Becker, 2016; Corasaniti, 2016); claimed the election would be rigged in ways that risked undermining the peaceful certification of results had he lost (Parker and Corasaniti, 2016; Fisher, 2016); spoke approvingly of Japanese interment camps during World War II (which are widely considered an occasion on which the US violated democratic norms) (Calmes, 2015); and embraced interference in the US election from a foreign power (Parker and Sanger, 2016).

Other institutions and individuals also violated longstanding norms. A major party nominated a presidential candidate with no political or military experience. The director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation announced that Clinton was under investigation, apparently because he feared that subordinates would leak that information if he did not. That is, he allied himself with the internal political preferences of the bureaucracy rather than civilian political control (Bertrand, 2016). To understand the causes and consequences of these violations of the norms of American politics, we need research that situates these norm violations in comparative and historical perspective. Do they arise from historical erosions of norms, or are they random or opportunistic violations that the party system tolerates? Do they threaten the democratic character of the state?

As a first step, consider this discussion of trouble signs in Latin American politics: "Evidence of a growing gap between citizens and politicians in Latin America is abundant: it includes declining party identification and voter turn out, high levels of electoral volatility, the rise of personalistic and 'neopopulist' outsiders, and in a few countries large scale protest against the entire political elite" (Helmke and Levitsky, 2006). These statements are recognizably true of the United States in 2017 as well (Klar and Krupnikov, 2016). Helmke and Levitsky go on to argue that informal institutions in Latin America – especially particularistic institutions such as clientelism – sometimes compete with formal representative institutions, "erod[ing] the quality of programmatic representation."

In many cases, both in Latin America and elsewhere, informal institutions shore up formal institutions. Cohen et al argue that the "invisible primary" – a period in which presidential candidates recruited support from party elites – enhanced the power of party organizations in presidential

elections between 1980 and 2008 (Cohen et al., 2009), constrained the possible nominees, and gave party elites leverage over their behavior and policy positions (Azari and Smith, 2012). In the 2016 election, one key puzzle is the failure of this informal institution, as the Republican Party nominated a candidate strongly opposed by its elite members. Azari argues that the decline in the strength of party organizations reduced the ability of the party to enforce that norm, while strong partisanship among voters meant that the party's nominee could attract support despite party elite's distaste (Azari, 2016). This left elites unable to prevent the nomination of a candidate who ignored informal norms that shore up peaceful transfer of power, transparency, and alack of corruption. Since enforcement and stability are key to the survival of both formal and informal institutions, this suggests that these norms no longer constrain presidential candidates (Levitsky and Murillo, 2009).

Similarly, Senate norms about the use of the filibuster acted as informal institutions. This informal institution has changed dramatically over the last several decades, as Senators have massively expanded their use of their formal powers to delay and prevent Senate action (Azari and Smith, 2012). Formal rules about the use of the filibuster have changed, but, as Azari and Smith demonstrate, neither Krehbiel's theory of pivotal politics nor Binder and Smith's liberal Senate hypothesis satisfactorily accounts for the change in filibuster frequency (Azari and Smith, 2012; Krehbiel, 2010; Binder and Smith, 2001). Rather, this is a change in informal norms about the use of a consistent, formal rule.

The rise of the 60-vote Senate dramatically changes the range of policy possibilities for legislation: "in January 2010, the Democrats loss of their sixtieth Senate seat was greeted as a near-fatal blow to the policy ambitions of a party that still dominated the chamber 59-41" (Azari and Smith, 2012). Just as significant, Senatorial privileges such as the ability of any member to place a hold on a nominee, as well as the expanded use of the filibuster, have led to an increasing number of vacancies in Senate-confirmed positions in the bureaucracy, damaging the ability of the executive branch

to implement policy (Joseph O'Connell, 2015). In the wake of Trump's election, two simultaneous changes to the norms of the appointment process have begun: progressive organizations are mobilizing anti-Trump voters to call their Senators to oppose large numbers of Trump's appointees, while the Republican-led Senate has scheduled confirmation hearings before the completion of ethics screenings (Steinhauer and Lichtblau, 2017).

How can we understand the relationship between these violations of norms and US democratic institutions? Do these changes pose a major threat, or are they a minor blip in an otherwise stable state situation? Levitsky and Ziblatt argue that they are a major concern in the context of Trump's election:"the risk we face, then, is not merely a president with illiberal proclivities – it is the election of such a president when the guardrails protecting American democracy are no longer as secure" (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2016). Two literatures from comparative politics are helpful in assessing the significance of this unusual election cycle, and of changes in informal norms more broadly. Broadly speaking, the foundations of state legitimacy lean either on the democratic attributes of the state, or on its effective performance for citizens (Gilley, 2013; Lipset, 1959; Tyler, 2006; Zhao, 2009).[1] Thus, changes in the *representativeness* of the American government, such as the selection of a president who received fewer votes because of legacy electoral institutions, may influence one basis of legitimacy.

Over the last several decades, rhetorical challenges to the president's legitimacy have escalated. Obama faced repeated accusations that he was in fact not a US citizen, but rather a Kenyan Muslim. These rumors gained substantial traction among Republican partisans: only about a quarter of Republicans were certain that Obama was born in the United States, compared to more than 80% of Democrats (Clinton and Roush, 2016). In the 2016 election, the Trump campaign pre-emptively challenged the legitimacy of the election results by describing them repeatedly as "rigged" (Fisher, 2016). When Trump won, Democrats – though largely not the Democratic leadership – raised

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[1]The brevity of this paper precludes a more comprehensive discussion.

concerns about the legitimacy of the results given CIA reports of Russian intervention against Democrats and Trump's razor-thin margins in decisive states (Gabriel and Sanger, 2016). The latter recalled the doubts raised about George W. Bush's legitimacy in 2000, after the contested Florida recount (Barstow and Van Natta Jr., 2001). These legitimacy concerns are substantively different from partisan disagreement in that they attack the right of the elected candidate to hold office rather than his or her policy positions.

In addition, the increased difficulty of passing legislation and staffing the federal government makes it more difficult for policy implementation to be successful – thus potentially threatening the performance basis of legitimacy. Of particular importance is a strain of rhetoric and policy-making in the Republican Party aimed at diminishing not the extent of government intervention or redistribution, but the capacity of government. In 1986, Reagan claimed that "the nine most terrifying words in the English language are: I'm from the Government, and I'm here to help" (Reagan, 1986). The strain continues through Grover Norquist, founder and president of a major Republican-side interest group, saying "I don't want to abolish government. I simply want to re-duce it to the size where I can drag it into the bathroom and drown it in the bathtub" (Liasson, 2001). In 2013, Senate Republicans engaged in a months-long blockade of all nominees to the Na-tional Labor Relations Board, along with the District of Columbia circuit court and the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau; because the NLRB was operating without a quorum and thus unable to make rulings, the blockade brought its operations entirely to a halt (MacGillis, 2013).

Trump's presidency continues this trend: among others, the nominee for Secretary of Energy, Rick Perry, previously called for the abolition of the Department of Energy (though not by name, as the name escaped his mind) (Davenport, 2016). Political scientists tend to understand these decisions as an attempt to preserve the status quo by preventing action, or to secure a policy at a particular ideal point; to do so ignores the stated intention to dismantle and undermine the capacity of government rather than changing the policies it implements. These challenges to legitimacy, and

the actions they give rise to, deserve a deeper analysis by Americanists, especially since they appear likely to be increasingly consequential. Trump's open conflict post-election with the security services poses the risk that those agencies may become independent political actors – a concern well-documented and discussed in the comparative politics literature.

American politics as a subfield needs to grapple with the foundations of legitimacy in electoral institutions, and the implications of these norm violations. Are these norm violations in themselves a symptom of declining state legitimacy? If so, where does that decline originate? How will Trump's presidency, and the numerous norm violations it includes, influence the state's legitimacy in the future? How will political responses mediate the interactions between norms and electoral legitimacy?

2   Ethnoracial Politics and the Dominant Group

Writing about white identity, Jardina argues that "most work focuses squarely on outgroup attitudes among dominant groups, like white Americans, and on ingroup attitudes among racial and ethnic minorities." Thus, people of color are treated as the object of political attitudes: both people of color and white people are treated as subjects capable of having race-related opinions, but the object of these race-related political opinions are always people of color. The study of racial politics, in this context, is largely the study of attitudes towards people of color (Jardina, 2014).

This literature makes crucial contributions to understanding the role of race in the 2016 election. While the study of Trump's ascent is still in process, it is clear that white Trump supporters held distinctive views on African-Americans, Muslims, the Civil War, and other race-related topics (Tesler, 2016; Vavreck, 2016; Jardina, McElwee and Piston, 2016). And yet, this work also leaves two major gaps.

First, careful attention to the basis of legitimacy in US political institutions requires attention to the very different assessments of the legitimacy among different groups (Lerman and Weaver, 2014;

Cramer, 2016; Fagan, 2008). Research on the fragility of American democratic institutions could benefit from comparisons to historical and contemporary examples of the same norms. Efforts to make sense of the rise in filibusters could draw from its historical application to civil rights legislation. More pressingly, perhaps, those assessing the intervention of the security services in electoral politics should consider previous occasions on which the security services intervened – for example, their work against civil rights organizations, the Black Panther Party, and others (Bloom and Martin, 2013; Garrow, 1981). Integrating historical work on American politics, as well as work on racial politics, with the central analysis of American political institutions will shed important light on the fragility and robustness of those institutions. Scholars of racial and ethnic politics have done important work on these subjects, especially in historical perspective (Frymer, 2010; Francis, 2014; Schickler, 2016). But race is central, not peripheral, to American politics and political practice. Theories of political parties, Congress, and representation need to engage with the centrality of race and race-making institutions to American politics.

As the examples in the preceding paragraph suggest, a focus on race highlights many historical challenges to institutional legitimacy in the United States: the exclusion of black Southerners from the franchise, the use of procedural rules to maintain that disenfranchisement, and the use of state force against political enemies. This invites questions about whether the informal norms that supported political institutions *also* support racial inequality and other forms of oppression.

Second, there are important questions about when and how white racial identity matters for political demands, participation, and institutional affiliation. Scholars working on these subjects have given us valuable insights. Jardina's work focuses on cognitive explanations; she argues that "identity becomes salient in reaction to beliefs about the relatively threatened or waning status of the group. White Americans, in particular, are responding to the threat of population changes and the electoral success of non-white candidates like Barack Obama." Cramer argues that what she calls "rural consciousness" – a racialized place-based identity with additional important compo-

nents – played a central role in the rise of Republican governor Scott Walker in Wisconsin, and the surprising electoral success of Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump in Wisconsin and other Upper Midwestern states in 2016. Yet Cramer and Jardina are among the few scholars focused explicitly on white racialized identities. Sociologists, historians, and other scholars in the humanities and social sciences have built important work on "the formation and maintenance of white racial identity" (McDermott and Samson, 2005).

Moreover, Americanist political scientists could contribute valuable research on the reciprocal relationship between race-making and the state, including on how racialized demands from whites influence political behavior, elections, and policy outcomes. Here, again, closer connections to other areas in political science would be valuable. In comparative politics, Posner offers an instrumental theory of ethnic affiliation, arguing that ethnic identities are more valuable when they put the ethnic group in the minimum winning coalition, thus giving the winners as few coalition members as possible with whom to divide the spoils of victory. That would suggest that white racial voting would rise as whites near the 50% threshold (Posner, 2005). Theories of civil society and mobilization should consider the problems with political engagement, like the rise of "bad civil society" (Chambers and Kopstein, 2001). Bringing the United States into comparative perspective should be done with careful attention to the unique racial history of the United States and its unusual institutions, but can nevertheless contribute valuable insights.

Finally, Americanist political science could treat white racial identity as an object of "race-making institutions." Writing about race-class subjugated neighborhoods, Soss and Weaver argue that such neighborhoods "are not simply places where political events may occur. They are actively and socially made as 'raced' and 'classed' places, built over time through government policies and public investment decisions that organize housing, education, welfare, and policing, that segregate and stigmatize some while elevating and insulating others, that deploy power in various forms to shape understandings of groups and 'their places' that eventually come to seem natural, given, and

legitimate." Soss and Weaver argue further that "race-making institutions ... delineate racialized spaces and constrain movement... they also shape material conditions within these spaces in ways that define and give meaning to durable 'classification[s] of social status" (Soss and Weaver, 2017)

These crucial arguments apply equally well to the role of the state in organizing, segregating, and bounding white neighborhoods. As surely as intensive policing, mass incarceration, redlining, and other state interventions that disproportionately target people of color define the social meaning of race for those targeted, so do the home mortgage interest deduction, local school funding and control, and restrictive zoning make whiteness. The institutions that "organize housing, education, welfare, and policing" work together to produce white class-privileged suburban neighborhoods, white rural areas, and the preferential access to resources of white individuals within racially diverse cities. When Cramer finds "rural consciousness" among residents of small Wisconsin towns, that rural consciousness is shaped and racialized by the policies that have led to those towns to be majority white (Cramer, 2016). Haywards indispensable work provides a beginning to this endeavor by describing the narratives that link state institutions and identity; there remains much for scholars to unpack (Hayward, 2013).

3   Conclusion

As Americanists consider the Trump presidency, we must reckon with the problems Trump poses not only for the polity, but for our research. The study of American political institutions has been disconnected from the study of comparative politics, the study of American history, and the study of ethnoracial politics in the United States. These disconnections left us blinkered, unable to see the full context for Trump's political rise. To understand Trump's presidency, we will need to see both the continuities and the differences between modern threats to democratic institutions and their historical analogues. In assessing the fragility (or robustness) of our democratic institutions, we need to move beyond a liberal-democratic understanding of American politics to develop strong theories

of legitimacy and institutional fragility that incorporate the diversity of political relationships with the American state. These theories will need to treat ethnoracial politics both as a central driver of American politics, and as key to understanding problems with democratic institutions.

The narrow focus of Americanists contributed to our difficulty in interpreting Trump's political success. We must ensure it does not do the same for his presidency.

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