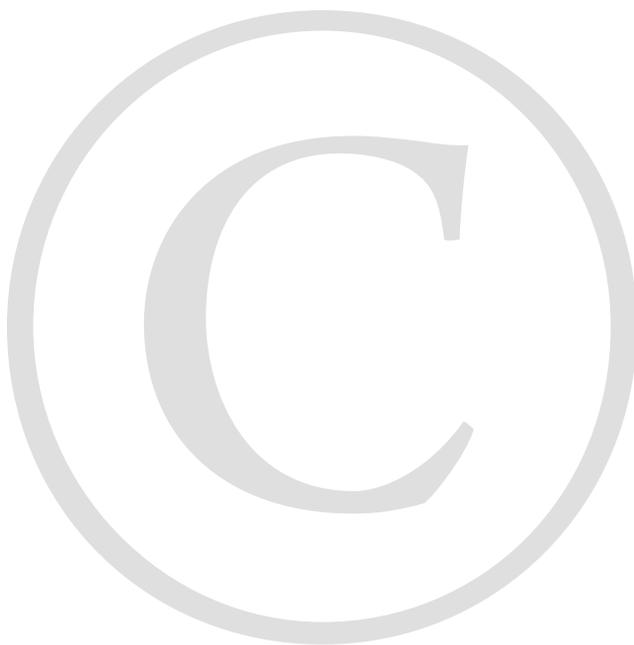
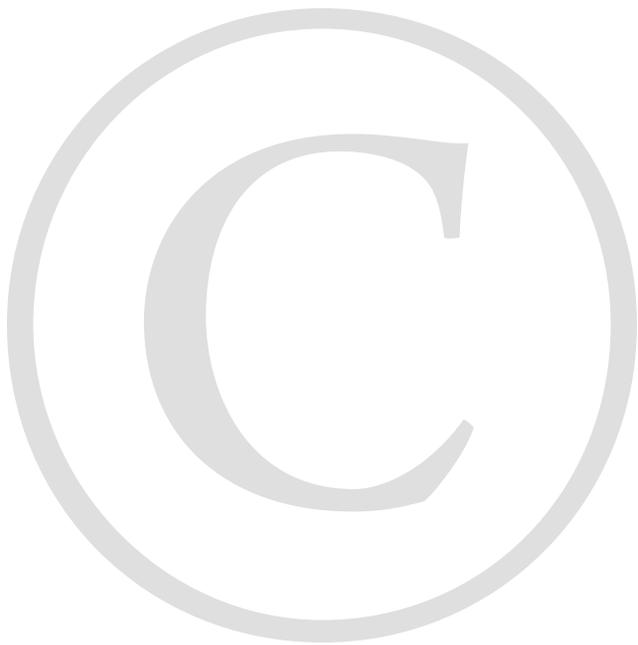


★ PRACTICING DEMOCRACY ★





PRACTICING DEMOCRACY

POPULAR POLITICS IN THE UNITED STATES ★ ★ ★ FROM THE CONSTITUTION TO THE CIVIL WAR ★ ★ ★

Daniel Peart and Adam I. P. Smith

EDITORS

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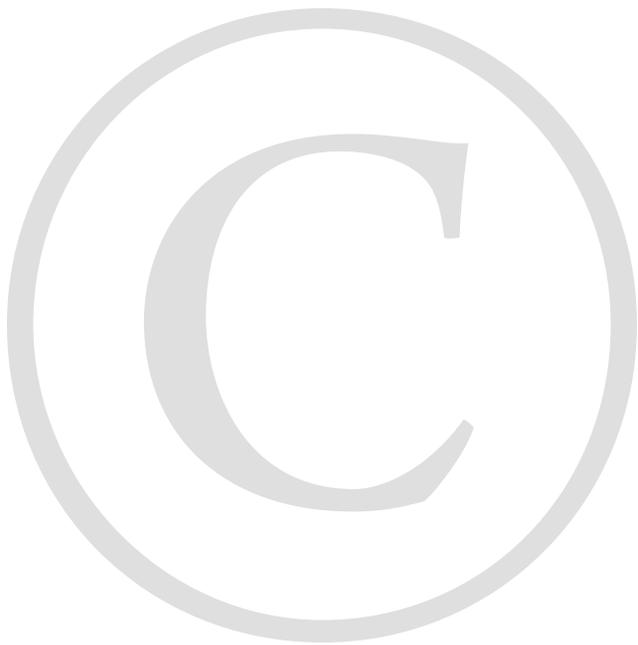
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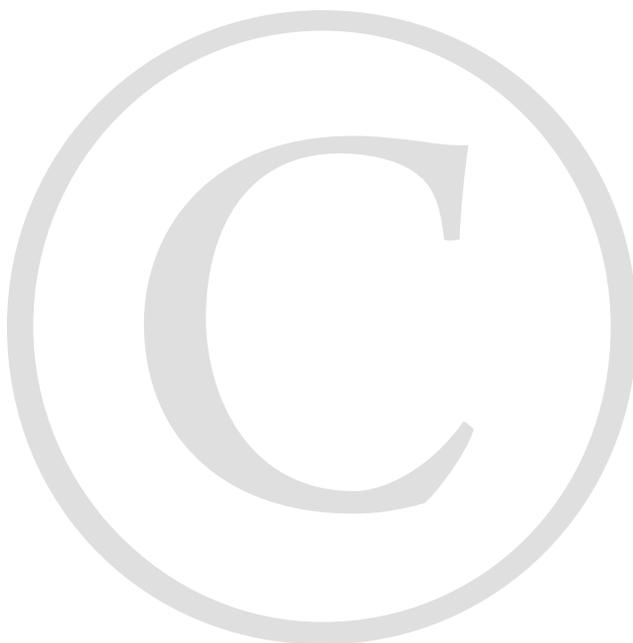
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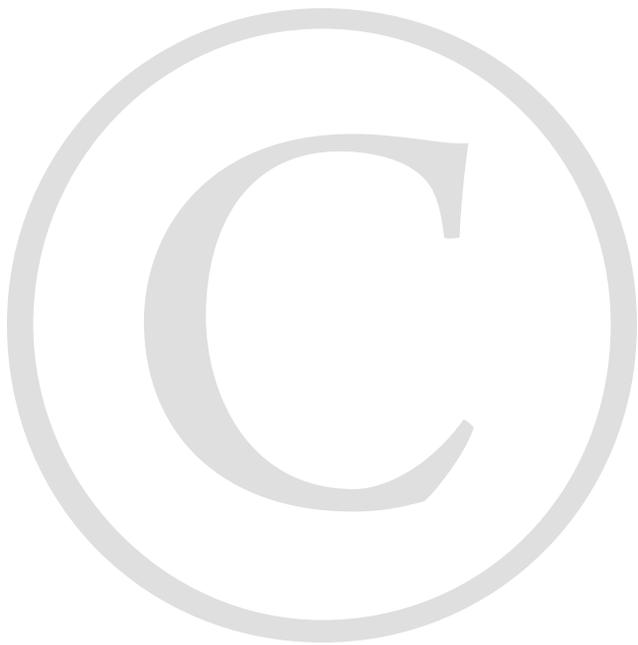
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Introduction

We have frequently printed the word democracy,” wrote Walt Whitman in 1871, “yet I cannot too often repeat that it is a word the gist of which still sleeps.”¹ Indeed, the frequency with which “democracy” is invoked in descriptions of the early United States, both by Whitman’s contemporaries and by subsequent scholars, is one of the main reasons why its meaning remains so difficult to capture. Delegates to the Philadelphia Convention in 1787 viewed democracy as an antique, and imperfect, form of government, and believed that their task was to check its influence in the nation’s new constitution. By the outbreak of the Civil War seventy-four years later, however, democracy had become the ubiquitous shorthand for American politics in totality: a government “of the people, by the people, for the people,” in Abraham Lincoln’s celebrated phrase. The French Revolution may have done much to revitalize and disseminate the concept of democracy, but by the middle of the nineteenth century, it was across the Atlantic that Europeans looked to see it in action. The writings of Alexis de Tocqueville were instrumental here, but the French aristocrat’s choice of title for his most famous publication merely reflected an already common, and common sense, understanding of American institutions, one that was made manifest in Britain, for example, by the frequent use of “Americanization” as a synonym for “democratization.”² Democracy, in its modern incarnation, came to prominence as an idea that described how Americans practiced their politics—or at least how they were imagined to do so—and it remains so today. Thus while our understanding of how United States politics actually worked between the ratification of the Constitution and the coming of the Civil War remains imprecise, so too must our understanding of democracy.

The purpose of this book is to address this problem. The constitutional roots of American democracy are not difficult to locate. The rhetorical commitment of the Founding Fathers to self-rule was natural enough, given the

political categories available to these gentlemen of the Enlightenment. Since sovereignty in the new republic manifestly did not reside in a monarch, it must, by default, reside in the people. But just as constitutional theorists claimed that royal sovereignty in Britain was embodied in Parliament, so there existed an influential discourse in the former colonies which argued—or simply assumed without need for elaborate argument—that popular sovereignty in practice could only be encoded in formally defined institutions. “We the people” was a statement of the constitutionally self-evident in the aftermath of the Declaration of Independence, but its democratic implications for political life in the young nation were far from clear.³

Looking back half a century from the heights of Jacksonian triumphalism in the 1830s, the radical editor William Leggett professed bemusement at the concerns of his revolutionary forefathers. Their anxiety to establish checks and balances, to guard against the “turbulence and contention” of a “pure democracy,” in James Madison’s words, struck him as quaint. “We have no such fears,” Leggett wrote, claiming to speak, in some cases certainly inaccurately, on behalf of his fellow citizens.⁴ Yet the practices most associated with American democracy, those that have come to define the U.S. political system since the Civil War, were the product of decades of experimentation, a process that was still far from complete when Leggett put pen to paper. Competition between two dominant national political parties, the identification of citizenship with the franchise, a reverence for the Constitution and constitutional procedures, and an exclusive focus on elections as moments of political choice: none of these outcomes were necessarily envisaged by the founding generation, and none were the inevitable consequence of their rhetorical commitment to popular sovereignty.

The oft-repeated narrative of the “rise” of democracy between the American Revolution and the Civil War can obscure as much as it reveals.⁵ Historians have found it hard to resist imposing a teleological account of political development onto an era that imagined politics very differently from our own. The familiar story is easily caricatured: a genteel politics dominated by men in silk stockings and powdered wigs was swamped by a rising tide of popular demands for inclusion in the political process, a tide bewigged gentlemen had inadvertently helped to unleash with their frequent paeans to popular sovereignty. Scribblers like William Leggett muscled their way into the political mainstream by deploying the language of democracy to give voice to “the people,” while skilled party-builders, typified by Martin Van Buren, crafted

the organizations necessary to mobilize a mass electorate. The election of the “People’s President,” Andrew Jackson, in 1828 heralded the dawning of the “Age of the Common Man.” “The first principle of our system,” proclaimed the new occupant of the White House, is “that the majority is to govern.”⁶

The triumph of this doctrine of majoritarianism, something that one of the Constitution’s principal architects, Madison, had plainly warned against, marked a transformation in political practices in the United States.⁷ Deferential relationships inherited from the colonial era were swept away, and in a wave of constitution writing and rewriting, the executive and judicial branches of many state governments were firmly subordinated to the legislatures, which claimed sole right to speak with the voice of the people. *Vox populi, vox Dei* was hardly a new slogan, but in the hands of men like the Jacksonian orator and historian George Bancroft, it became the justification for tearing down the elaborate constitutional checks and balances erected by the founders precisely to insulate government from simple majority rule.⁸ And as the American people flowed ever westward, they carried their evolving notions of self-government with them, creating roughly egalitarian white men’s republics predicated on the idea of universal property ownership.

To commentators like Leggett, this political trajectory appeared both natural and salutary. Jacksonian Democrats considered their party to be the faithful guardian of liberties won in the revolution, and “the instrument by which our institutions have been preserved in the progress of the nation.”⁹ And if “the Democracy,” as the party was known to friends and enemies alike, represented the singular embodiment of the sovereign people, its adversaries must be nothing more than a “false, rotten, insubstantial, effete” minority, often rendered “aristocrats” in shorthand.¹⁰ This Jacksonian self-image has cast a long shadow. The Progressive historians of the early twentieth century adopted as their own its principal tenet: that the transformation of American politics before the Civil War was driven by conflict between a rising popular coalition of western farmers and eastern wage laborers, and a patrician class of landholders, bankers, speculators, and industrialists. This titanic struggle climaxed in the presidential election of 1828, with Jackson, championing the forces of democracy, defeating revolutionary-era throwback John Quincy Adams, the representative of wealth, privilege, and elitism. In this view, expressed most cogently by Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and recently revived by Sean Wilentz, it was Jackson and his loyal lieutenants in the Democratic Party who provided the engine for democratization.¹¹

During the 1960s and 1970s, however, a new generation of historians, operating loosely under the label “New Political Historians,” began to look afresh at antebellum politics. Using methodologies borrowed from the social sciences, most notably the statistical analysis of census data and election returns, scholars including Lee Benson, Michael F. Holt, and Joel Silbey sought to “grasp the total behavior of all the actors in the political universe, rather than relying only on the statements, actions, and behavior of prominent leaders and observers of politics.”¹² The concept of “negative reference groups” was employed to explain how party-builders exploited ethnic and religious tensions, which replaced socioeconomic identities as the primary determinant of political behavior. Voters in this model were committed partisans, marching to the polls to support their own side, or perhaps more importantly to defeat their opponents. The Whig Party was no longer a bunch of out-of-touch aristocrats but a recognizably modern organization willing and able to compete with the Democrats for popular favor, and it was the establishment of nationwide two-party competition by 1840, not the election of a single charismatic leader, that provided the impetus for political change.

As scholars abandoned outdated syntheses organized by presidential administration, political parties offered the foundations for an alternative periodization of U.S. politics. Political scientist Walter Dean Burnham was at the forefront of this endeavor, proposing that American history be divided into five “party systems,” each defined by a distinctive pattern of partisan behavior.¹³ Following in his footsteps, scholars such as Richard L. McCormick and Joel Silbey grouped the second and third of these systems, spanning the decades from the 1830s to the 1890s, together under the label of the “Party Period,” during which “parties dominated political participation” and “voting was more partisan and more widespread than ever before.”¹⁴ Parties, they argued, were a manifestation of “modernization,” a welcome replacement for the personal, hierarchical relationships of an earlier, and less-complex, political era, and a necessary ingredient to make the founders’ constitutionalism function in practice. Party organizations articulated issues in ways that made sense to ordinary citizens, corralled them to the ballot box in ever-increasing numbers, and sustained unprecedented levels of popular engagement. They were also a critical force for integration in what was otherwise a fragmented national community. Parties were all-encompassing; they “defined the terms of political confrontation and shaped the behavior of most participants in the many levels of political activity.”¹⁵

Despite their differences, Progressive historians, practitioners of the New Political History, and subscribers to the Party Period concept were in general agreement on the far-reaching transition from a “traditional, notable-oriented and deferential politics” before the 1820s or 1830s to a “party, electorate-oriented and egalitarian style of politics” thereafter.¹⁶ In recent years, however, this chronology has come under severe scrutiny. Several scholars working on the immediate postrevolutionary period have shown that many citizens did not share the Founding Fathers’ concern that American politics was becoming too democratic.¹⁷

Meanwhile, new studies of the conflict between the first major American parties, the Federalists and Republicans, have uncovered evidence of high election turnouts occurring several decades earlier than previously thought. In his contribution to *Beyond the Founders*, a collection of essays from historians working in this field, Jeffrey Pasley even suggests that “this political culture was successful precisely because it was *not* a standardized national system,” a sharp dig at Party Period scholars’ admiration for Whig and Democratic organizations that he considers “routinized” and “bloated from too many injections of money.”¹⁸

Beyond the Founders also reflects the recent “cultural turn” in the historiography, as scholars have made use of Jürgen Habermas’s concept of the public sphere to broaden their definition of the political beyond the corridors of power and the calculus of the polling place, and moved away from statistical analysis to read subjects such as clothing, civic rituals, and even a “Mammoth Cheese” for their political meaning.¹⁹ One consequence of this is that scholars of both the early republic and the antebellum eras have uncovered new evidence for the political engagement of women and African Americans, demonstrating that participation in politics has hardly been limited to legally qualified voters. This is one tale that does not fit neatly into the conventional narrative of democratization, however. As Rosemarie Zagarrri has shown, over the decades that followed the ratification of the Constitution, women became less able to play a role in electoral politics, as party development brought more regulation to the world of conventions and committees.²⁰ Likewise, the access of African Americans to the ballot box measurably worsened during the first half of the nineteenth century, while their participation in public space was made more difficult by virulently racist mobs reacting to the rise of abolitionism.²¹

In spite of the many obstacles conspicuously placed in their paths, these and other disenfranchised groups were far from powerless — even enslaved

people could decisively influence the political destiny of the nation, as Stephanie McCurry has recently reminded us.²² But those who were excluded from formal political channels did not exercise the same kind of power as those who were not. At the very least, African Americans, and to a lesser extent women, exercised what might be called an implied political power in antebellum America since their visibility in the public sphere—particularly, of course, in the abolition movement—was a source of such anxiety to white conservatives. The white political imagination was filled with dystopian images of the anarchy that would result from an ever-greater exercise of power by black people, women, and other marginalized sections of society, such as immigrants.²³ Beyond this implied power, both women and African Americans also participated through the exertion of personal influence on the borders of the public/private divide, and through the establishment and operation of political organizations that existed outside the constitutionally defined realm of electoral politics but nonetheless proved to be remarkably effective at exerting pressure on elected representatives.²⁴

The existence of these self-created societies highlights the fact that political parties were just one manifestation of an outburst of associational activity during this period. Revolutionary groups like the Sons of Liberty were among the first to demonstrate that “the people” could adopt a public persona other than that of “the mob,” and when the war with Britain was brought to a successful conclusion, citizens of the newly independent United States continued to put this lesson to good use. Some of their organizations, like the fraternal societies and militia companies studied by Albrecht Koschnik, were made to serve manifestly partisan ends.²⁵ Others, like the Know-Nothings that form the subject of Mark Voss-Hubbard’s work, were born out of a persistent strain of anti-partisanship but reached maturity through participation in mainstream politics.²⁶ Other organizations that we would now think of as pressure groups, championing particular causes such as temperance, Sabbatarianism, tariff reform, or abolition, illustrated the dialectical relationship that existed between parties and nonpartisan movements in terms of ideas, personnel, and organizational techniques.²⁷ All of these groups, however, played a critical role in expanding the political life of the early United States; “in learning how to volunteer,” Neem observes, “ordinary people learned to think and to act as citizens. They ensured that citizenship in a democracy would not be confined to voting and to office holding.”²⁸

The rich outpouring of literature in the field of early U.S. political history during the last few decades has certainly expanded our knowledge in important ways. Nonetheless, a number of issues remain unresolved, and it is these that this book tackles. The first set of issues concern periodization and party development. The revolutionary generation were profoundly influenced by a republican ideology which taught that politics required the subordination of all private interests to the common pursuit of a unitary public good. Guided by these principles, as Richard Hofstadter has famously detailed, the Founding Fathers “could not see how organized and institutionalized party conflict could be made useful, or could be anything other than divisive, distracting, and dangerous.”²⁹ Subsequent studies have shown that many Americans remained suspicious of political parties long into the nineteenth century.³⁰ And yet right from the emergence of Federalist and Republican groupings in Congress during the 1790s, Americans certainly spoke and acted as if parties existed. The question then remains, as posed most succinctly by Gerald Leonard, “How did antiparty Americans invent the mass political party?”³¹

It is conventional to divide the period from the revolution to the Civil War into early republic and antebellum eras; we have used this language ourselves in this introduction. Yet as David Waldstreicher has observed, the “continuing power of the traditional narrative, which divides political history—and U.S. history generally—at about 1815 or 1820,” is the principal reason that “parallel stories of democratization are being told” about the 1800s and the 1830s.³² Subscribers to the Party Period model have dismissed evidence of high election turnouts in the preceding decades as insignificant; “popular voting remained volatile,” writes Joel Silbey, and “there was little persistent evidence of party loyalty from election to election.”³³ In response, Jeffrey Pasley has provocatively countered that “the transition from the loose decentralized parties of Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton to the mass party organizations of Martin Van Buren and Abraham Lincoln were [*sic*] a step back for American democracy.”³⁴ Clearly there were differences between the political practices of the Jeffersonian and Jacksonian eras, but bound by their traditional areas of specialty, recent historians have not attempted to place the two periods in comparative perspective.³⁵

Then there is the issue of political realignment. The Party Period concept emphasizes the continuity and stability of the years between the advent of mass parties in the 1830s and the end of the century. Yet in the middle of this

era, the nation descended into a bloody civil war, a cataclysm precipitated by the collapse of the Whig-Democrat party system in the 1850s. If parties were so all-powerful, how are we to explain their failure to suppress the rise of sectional tensions and, in the case of the Whigs, to prevent their own demise? Michael F. Holt and William E. Gienapp, among others, have described party leaders' battling against rising public dissatisfaction with the practice of "politics as usual."³⁶ Hostility to sinister behind-the-scenes "wire-pullers" and a sense that partisanship was corrupting the body politic made sectional compromise and conciliation harder. "The party has failed us," concluded the *New York Times* in 1861. Partisanship had "brought the nation to this state of Armageddon."³⁷ This crisis of party in the 1850s has major implications for a longitudinal study of democratization and party development.

The first part of the book addresses this theme of political development between the revolution and Civil War. Douglas Bradburn examines the origins of America's first national parties in order to show how their emergence was shaped by forces of "path dependency." Reeve Huston addresses head-on the traditional divide between early republic and antebellum historians to identify what was novel about Jacksonian politics and what was merely a continuation of Jeffersonian practice. And John L. Brooke offers a new dichotomy of "structure" and "liminality" to explain the collapse of the Democrat-Whig party system in the build-up to the Civil War. These three chapters, then, offer a fresh perspective on the origins, evolution, and disintegration of party-driven forms of politics.

A second set of issues, which follow naturally from this groundwork, surrounds the relationship between political parties and popular participation. Parties figure in the conventional narrative as the prime agents of democratization. As Ronald P. Formisano has long since (critically) observed, most historians of this period "believe that a competitive, two-party system opened up political life, brought distant governments closer to more citizens, and made power more responsive to constituent demands," or, in other words, that "party virtually equals democracy."³⁸ This consensus rests on the voluminous statistical analysis of election returns completed by the New Political Historians, and the assumption, voiced most concisely by William Gienapp, that "the best available indicator of the extent of popular interest in politics in pre-Civil War America, as well as the degree to which the political universe of the nineteenth century was unique, is voter turnout."³⁹

A decade ago, however, this conclusion was contested by Glenn C. Altschuler and Stuart M. Blumin, who argued that high turnout can be read as evidence not of “a widespread and deep engagement in politics,” but rather of “the extraordinary achievement of American political parties in mobilizing voters, some of whom were ignorant of, uninterested in, sceptical about, or even averse to political affairs.” Parties, with all of their “elaborate structures and techniques for nominating candidates, devising platforms, conducting campaigns, and maximizing election-day turnout,” represented “the efforts of those who were deeply involved in political affairs to reach and influence those who were not.” Instead of genuinely promoting a broad-based participatory democracy, parties became adept at providing a “clearly labeled ‘package’ of candidates, programs, and images that less thoughtful or less interested voters could ‘purchase’ without difficulty.” In fact, according to Altschuler and Blumin, “the very institutional development that facilitated the more widespread purchase of party packages may have deepened the distance between less engaged citizens and the political process.” Precisely because parties were so efficient, “Americans could, if they wished, leave the work [of politics] to the professionals, and go about their other business.”⁴⁰

The findings of Altschuler and Blumin have provoked fierce debate. Questions had already been raised about the accuracy of the New Political Historians’ data on voter turnout.⁴¹ Now, though, doubts were raised about whether the statistical analysis of election returns, even if properly conducted, could ever provide a reliable indicator of popular engagement with politics. By focusing on the frequently dubious methods employed by party activists to drag voters to the polls, and the priority that party leaders placed on winning elections above all else, some recent studies appear almost to echo Edward Pessen’s provocative claim that “the great major parties were in a large sense great hoaxes.”⁴² In response, others have sprung to the defense of party; Harry L. Watson, for example, writes that “the [political] process depends on leaders who articulate options and attempt to generate interest in them, but public response is not automatic or arbitrary. The people will only ‘buy’ those options they feel a genuine interest in . . . and endless get-out-the-vote rigmarole will not get them to the polls if they are not inclined to go already.”⁴³ The relationship between parties and popular participation is now more contested than ever before.

The second part of the book approaches this problem from three different perspectives. Andrew W. Robertson reconsiders the role that political parties

played in both franchise reform and the fashioning of a deliberative public sphere, and emphasizes the tortuous ways in which American democratic ideology and practices ebbed and flowed in the early republic. Daniel Peart explores the connection between party competition and election turnout during the so-called Era of Good Feelings, and provides new evidence to demonstrate that participation rates at the state level were actually higher where political parties were weak or nonexistent than where two-party competition was more firmly established. Graham A. Peck describes the relationship between voters and politicians in Illinois during the so-called second party system (a phrase that he argues is a misnomer). In his depiction, parties were neither durable nor stable, with voters' support highly "conditional." The central theme that unites all three chapters is the issue of whether parties truly served to expand the democratic possibilities of American politics, or whether their role was less straightforwardly affirmative than the standard narrative would suggest.

The final set of issues concerns the place of parties in American political life. The Party Period paradigm rests on the primacy of parties. Even important critics of particular aspects of the paradigm have not challenged this core assumption; Altschuler and Blumin, for example, conclude that "very little that would happen in American politics, especially in the routine conduct of political affairs, would occur beyond the realm of the party."⁴⁴ Yet the plethora of third parties, the variety and vitality of associational activity, and the ultimate collapse of both the Federalist-Republican and Whig-Democrat party systems suggest that parties faced considerable challenges in containing alternative forms of political action and maintaining their own organizational dominance.⁴⁵

Parties were certainly not the only way of organizing politics available to contemporaries, so what made them so distinctive? The term "party" itself needs to be carefully historicized since neither the language of party nor the forms of organization that contemporaries associated with parties were consistent over time.⁴⁶ Then there is the issue of how political parties related to, and engaged with, other forms of participation. In his recent survey of populist movements from the revolution to the Civil War, Formisano suggests that by the 1840s, the rise of party meant that "both the public space and contested legitimacy once claimed by populist insurgencies and movements . . . had grown more restricted." While Formisano calls this an "ironic sidebar" on "grand narratives chronicling the 'rise of democracy,'" there is a growing

sense that the ironies have now become so imposing as to require that the narrative itself be rewritten.⁴⁷

The third part of the book explores the interaction between political parties and the more broadly defined civil society, which, taken together, provides the sum of American political practices during this era. Kenneth Owen investigates how political leaders exercised power in the years immediately following the ratification of the Constitution, and finds that their success or failure often depended not on their control of the formal institutions of government but on their ability to demonstrate popular support from extra-constitutional representative institutions such as public meetings. Tyler Anbinder compares the experiences of Irish and German immigrants in the antebellum North in a bid to understand whether political parties offered these groups a meaningful share of political power. Finally, Andrew Heath explores the campaign for a new city charter in antebellum Philadelphia, and demonstrates that far from welcoming parties as harbingers of democracy, reformers were motivated by a determination to break the power of the party machines.

Thinking about politics in a more expansive way than was once the case has enormously enriched our understanding of politics in the early United States. Yet there are dangers, too, in the “cultural turn,” if a focus on political identity and expression fails to also account for what Formisano has called the “classic considerations of political life . . . who gets what, why, and how?”⁴⁸ Stefan Collini’s definition of politics as “the important, inescapable, and difficult attempt to determine relations of power in a given space” is useful here since it clearly encompasses much more than formal politics, yet also clarifies the goal to which all political activity must be directed.⁴⁹ Politics is about power—and power, by definition, is always relational: one exercises it over those who have less. Power can, of course, be symbolic and cultural, or “soft,” but it is fundamentally exercised in the context of which groups and individuals can exert “hard” economic or political power.

That brings us to a theme that runs throughout the book, which is the relationship among citizens, parties, and governance. Different forms of participation must be understood in relation to the objects of that participation. The practice of democracy was not simply an end in itself; it was also a means of influencing political outcomes. One of the apparent strengths of the Party Period paradigm was that it tied parties, elections, and policymaking together. “The same party organizations that mobilized citizens on election day also

structured their receipt of government goods,” explained Richard L. McCormick, and this “distribution strengthened the parties and helped build bridges between their voters, leaders, and representatives in office.”⁵⁰ Wary of using government for regulatory or redistributive purposes, politicians instead saw government as a way of apportioning the proceeds of an expanding national domain among their supporters at the polls, through public land sales, tariff protection for domestic industries, and log-rolling development projects. This distributive policymaking, according to McCormick, underpinned parties’ centrality to the era just as much as their distribution of public offices in the form of patronage.

While McCormick’s “exploratory hypothesis” was swiftly adopted as a central plank of the Party Period concept, it has also provoked its fair share of critics. As Formisano notes, in an article that neatly summarizes the arguments on both sides, the claim “that distributive policies created satisfaction with the two major parties and the political system itself—what might be termed *regime satisfaction*”—is relatively uncontroversial, but a higher burden of proof is required to demonstrate that “parties actually served as vehicles for distributive policies intended to build coalitions or satisfy constituencies.” Yet Formisano also rejects the opposite conclusion that “policy and voting were wholly unrelated.”⁵¹ Since Formisano’s article, some scholars have taken up the challenge of providing the missing evidence for McCormick’s hypothesis; Richard Bense, for example, highlights the crucial role played by local party agents in mediating between elected representatives, seeking to promote their own political agenda on the state or national stage, and voters at the polls, whose support was obtained through negotiations that might have little or nothing to do with considerations of public policy.⁵² Others continue to seek alternative explanations for government activity. Robin L. Einhorn on the role of slavery in shaping United States taxation policy, William J. Novak on public regulation to facilitate economic development, and Daniel Peart on the struggle among competing interest groups to determine federal tariff rates are all examples of a growing body of work which again reinforces the point that practicing democracy is about more than just parties and elections.⁵³

McCormick’s formula may be overly neat, but several contributions to this volume echo one implication of his thesis, which is that parties were strongest and most in control of their fate when issues conducive to distributive policymaking were at the center of political debate. Where parties were vulnerable was in the face of issues that forced governments on the local, state,

and national levels to make difficult, often binary, choices—to ban alcohol or not, to restrict slavery in the territories or not, and so on. Single-issue pressure groups, or public opinion leaders like churchmen and newspaper editors, could mobilize voters on these issues without having to worry, as mainstream parties did, about the difficulties of building and maintaining diverse coalitions to win elections. Nineteenth-century American politics revolved around such tensions between party leaders' desires to "routinize" politics and outsiders' desires to impose some sweeping reform (or to stop one).

This notion of politics as a ceaseless struggle over power relationships, expressed in numerous ways but always with a clear goal, underlies the approach taken by the authors of the essays that follow. We do not take parties and elections to be the only meaningful arena for political action, but we do think that it is necessary to clarify what institutions and practices were available to different groups of Americans, and how effectively each could be used to exercise power. We also aim to take on board insights about greater participation in the early period without "flattening" our understanding of change over time. Such methodological issues are the subject of the final essay in this book. Johann N. Neem argues that instead of relying on voter turnout as a proxy for democratization, historians should concentrate on the capability of ordinary citizens to affect political outcomes, an approach that promises to integrate recent work on civil society with more traditional party-oriented perspectives.

Taken as a whole, this book has three main findings:

1. We offer a new way of thinking about American politics across the traditional dividing line of circa 1828. In recent years, historians of the early republic have demolished old assumptions about low rates of political participation and shallow popular partisanship in the age of Jefferson. But this raises the question of how, if at all, Jacksonian politics departed from earlier norms. This book reaffirms the significance of a transition in political practices during the 1820s and 1830s, but casts the transformation in a different light. Whereas the traditional narrative is one of a party-driven democratic awakening, the contributors to this volume offer a more complex reading of changing organizational forms and styles of politics, one that emphasizes both the constricting definition of legitimate "democratic" practices in the decades following the revolution and the proliferation within those bounds of competing public voices in the build-up toward the Civil War.

2. We challenge the conventional wisdom that with the coming of the so-called Party Period, American politics reached its apogee of participation. In

contrast, several contributors to this volume critique the role of political parties in this story, stressing their function to manage the people *as well as* to empower them. These two apparently contradictory functions actually coexisted, though often in continuing tension with one another, as party leaders strove both to stimulate and to channel voters' energies, spawning unprecedented rates of sustained electoral participation by the 1840s and 1850s. Equally important, what this book also suggests is that the major parties' hold on the electorate was always contested, as the demise of the Whigs very obviously demonstrates. Political actors from outside the formal party system—Know-Nothings, abolitionists, temperance campaigners, advocates for the right of labor, protectionists and free traders, anti-rent protestors, secessionists, and many more—were frequently able to galvanize the electorate in ways that subverted the intentions and interests of party leaders. Yet parties remained central to the electoral process, and it is telling that insurgents, often with single-issue campaigns, usually ended up allying with, or being subsumed by, parties. The point is that we cannot simply tell the story of American democracy as one of ever-gradual empowerment of “the people” (however we may define that defiantly plural entity). The advent of more formalized and self-conscious parties in the Jacksonian era was neither the apotheosis nor the nemesis of popular democracy.

3. We argue that, while parties were by far the most visible and important political formations in these decades, they existed in constant interaction with groups and individuals who could utilize alternative—and sometimes strikingly effective—non- and anti-partisan means of mobilizing the public. Seldom were party leaders in complete control of the issues that drove politics at any particular moment, and their need to construct and maintain a broad-based, electorally viable coalition made them inherently vulnerable to targeted insurgent campaigns. Furthermore, the traditional American mistrust for centralized power placed officeholders at a disadvantage against those who could successfully pose as “outs,” representing the people against the “wire-pullers” of corrupt partisans. Republican electoral advances in 1858–60, for example, were due to their ability to pose as the antiestablishment insurgents as well as their antislavery message. Like the Know-Nothing organizations that swept to dramatic victories in state elections in 1854 and 1855, Republicans claimed their candidates were “fresh from the loins of the people.”⁵⁴ This, after all, was a period in which the “rules of the game” were far from settled, and the practices of politics were themselves frequently the subject of

political conflict, as Americans struggled to reconcile their competing, and often contradictory, interpretations of popular sovereignty.

In sum, then, this book is an effort to crystallize emerging scholarship that resists a teleological reading of progress toward the present-day U.S. political system organized around two competing national parties.⁵⁵ The tale that emerges from this volume is not a whiggish one of “democratization,” but a more complex, sometimes ironic portrait of the changing ways in which ordinary Americans — “We the People” — could exercise political power in the decades between the ratification of the Constitution and the coming of the Civil War.

Notes

1. Walt Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, ed. J. Kaplan (New York: Library of America, 1996), 984.

2. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 2 vols. (1835–40; New York: Library of America, 2004); John Dunn, *Setting the People Free: The Story of Democracy* (London: Atlantic Books, 2005); Pierre Rosanvallon, *The Demands of Liberty: Civil Liberty in France since the Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007); Joanna Innes and Mark Philp, eds., *Re-imagining Democracy in the Age of Revolution: America, France, Britain, Ireland, 1750–1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Axel Körner, Nicola Miller, and Adam I. P. Smith, eds., *America Imagined: Explaining the United States in Nineteenth Century Europe and Latin America* (New York: Palgrave, 2012); Robert Saunders, *Democracy and the Vote in British Politics, 1848–1867: The Making of the Second Reform Act* (Farnham, Eng.: Ashgate, 2011).

3. Ronald P. Formisano, *For the People: American Populist Movements from the Revolution to the 1850s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008); Christian G. Fritz, *American Sovereigns: The People and America’s Constitutional Tradition before the Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Suzette Hemberger, “A Government Based on Representations,” *Studies in American Political Development* 10 (Fall 1996): 289–332; Edmund S. Morgan, *Inventing the People: The Rise of Popular Sovereignty in England and America* (New York: Norton, 1988).

4. James Madison, “The Federalist 10,” in *The Federalist Papers*, ed. Lawrence Goldman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 52; William Leggett, *A Collection of the Political Writings of William Leggett*, 2 vols. (New York, 1840), 1:262.

5. Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815–1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York: Norton, 2005); Gordon S. Wood, *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789–1815* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

6. *Annual Messages, Veto Messages, Protest Etc. of Andrew Jackson, President of the United States* (Baltimore, 1835), 10.

7. Madison, "Federalist 10," 48–55.

8. George Bancroft, *An Oration Delivered on the Fourth of July, 1826* (Northampton, Mass., 1826), 19–20.

9. "The United States Constitution," *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* 22 (May 1848): 387.

10. *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 7 November 1846.

11. Arthur Schlesinger Jr., *The Age of Jackson* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1945); Wilentz, *Rise of American Democracy*.

12. Joel H. Silbey, *The Partisan Imperative: The Dynamics of American Politics before the Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), xiv. See also Lee Benson, *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy: New York as a Test Case* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1961), and Michael F. Holt, *Forging a Majority: The Formation of the Republican Party in Pittsburgh, 1848–1860* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1969).

13. Walter Dean Burnham, "Party Systems and the Political Process," in *The American Party Systems: Stages of Political Development*, ed. William Nisbet Chambers and Walter Dean Burnham (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 277–307. Burnham's work built on V. O. Key Jr., "A Theory of Critical Elections," *Journal of Politics* 17 (February 1955): 3–18.

14. Richard L. McCormick, "The Party Period and Public Policy: An Exploratory Hypothesis," *Journal of American History* 66 (September 1979): 279–98, 281, 283 (quotations). See also Joel H. Silbey, *The American Political Nation, 1838–1893* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1991).

15. *Ibid.*, 9.

16. Ronald P. Formisano, "Deferential-Participant Politics: The Early Republic's Political Culture, 1789–1840," *American Political Science Review* 68 (June 1974): 473–87. Formisano's notable contribution was to show how this transition took place gradually and unevenly over half a century.

17. Woody Holton, *Unruly Americans and the Origins of the Constitution* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007); Terry Bouton, *Taming Democracy: "The People," The Founders and the Troubled Ending of the American Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Michael A. McDonnell, *The Politics of War: Race, Class and Conflict in Revolutionary Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Seth Cotlar, *Tom Paine's America: The Rise and Fall of Transatlantic Radicalism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011).

18. Jeffrey L. Pasley, "The Cheese and the Words: Popular Political Culture and Participatory Democracy in the Early American Republic," in *Beyond the Founders: New Approaches to the Political History of the Early American Republic*, ed. Jeffrey L. Pasley, Andrew W. Robertson, and David Waldstreicher (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 49.

19. These examples are all taken from essays in *Beyond the Founders*.

20. Rosemarie Zagarri, *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 147–80. See also John L. Brooke, “Spheres, Sites, Subjectivity, History: Reframing Antebellum American Society,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 28 (Spring 2008): 75–82. Exceptions to this trend are noted by Susan Graham, “‘A Warm Politician and Devotedly Attached to the Democratic Party’: Catherine Read Williams, Politics and Literature in Antebellum America,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 30 (Summer 2010): 253–78; Elizabeth R. Varon, *We Mean to Be Counted: White Women and Politics in Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); and Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray, *Voices without Votes: Women and Politics in Antebellum New England* (Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2010).

21. Alexander Keyssar, *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

22. Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012).

23. See, for example, Don E. Fehrenbacher, *Prelude to Greatness: Lincoln in the 1850's* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1962), and Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Verso, 1990).

24. Catherine Allgor, *Parlor Politics: In Which the Ladies of Washington Help Build a City and a Government* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000); Anne M. Boylan, *The Origins of Women's Activism: New York and Boston, 1787–1840* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Gary Nash, *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720–1840* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988); Patrick Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest in the Antebellum North* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Richard S. Newman, *The Transformation of American Abolitionism: Fighting Slavery in the Early Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

25. Albrecht Koschnik, “*Let a Common Interest Bind Us Together*”: *Associations, Partisanship, and Culture in Philadelphia, 1775–1840* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007).

26. Mark Voss-Hubbard, *Beyond Party: Cultures of Antipartisanship in Northern Politics before the Civil War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

27. See, for example, Reeve Huston, “Popular Movements and Party Rule: The New York Anti-Rent Wars and the Jacksonian Political Order,” in *Beyond the Founders*, and Johann N. Neem, *Creating a Nation of Joiners: Democracy and Civil Society in Early National Massachusetts* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008).

28. *Ibid.*, 82. For an important recent study that combines all of these aspects, see John L. Brooke, *Columbia Rising: Civil Life on the Upper Hudson from the Revolution to the Age of Jackson* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

29. Richard Hofstadter, *The Idea of a Party System: The Rise of Legitimate Opposition in the United States, 1780–1840* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), ix.

30. Adam I. P. Smith, *No Party Now: Politics in the Civil War North* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Voss-Hubbard, *Beyond Party*.

31. Gerald Leonard, *The Invention of Party Politics: Federalism, Popular Sovereignty, and Constitutional Development in Jacksonian Illinois* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 3.

32. David Waldstreicher, "The Nationalization and Racialization of American Politics: Before, Beneath, and Between Parties, 1790–1840," in *Contesting Democracy: Substance and Structure in American Political History, 1775–2000*, ed. Byron E. Shafer and Anthony J. Badger (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001), 37.

33. Silbey, *American Political Nation*, 15.

34. Jeffrey L. Pasley, "Party Politics, Citizenship, and Collective Action in Nineteenth-Century America: A Response to Stuart Blumin and Michael Schudson," *Communication Review* 4 (2000): 48.

35. A comparative perspective was one of the advantages of the "party systems" model favored by many New Political Historians and political scientists, which has since fallen out of favor. For a notable example of this earlier comparative perspective, see Ronald P. Formisano, *The Transformation of Political Culture: Massachusetts Parties, 1790s–1840s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983).

36. Michael F. Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York: Norton, 1980); Michael F. Holt, *The Fate of Their Country: Politicians, Slavery Extension, and the Coming of the Civil War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004); William E. Gienapp, *The Origins of the Republican Party, 1852–1856* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Mark W. Summers, *The Plundering Generation: Corruption and the Crisis of the Union* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Voss-Hubbard, *Beyond Party*; Smith, *No Party Now*; Michael Thomas Smith, *The Enemy Within: Fears of Corruption in the Civil War North* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011).

37. *The New York Times*, 7 July 1861, quoted in Smith, *No Party Now*, 1.

38. Formisano, "Deferential-Participant Politics," 473.

39. William E. Gienapp, "'Politics Seem to Enter into Everything': Political Culture in the North, 1840–1860," in *Essays on American Antebellum Politics, 1840–1860*, ed. Stephen E. Maizlish and John J. Kushma (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1982), 17.

40. Glenn C. Altschuler and Stuart M. Blumin, *Rude Republic: Americans and Their Politics in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), 79–81.

41. See, for example, Gerald Ginsburg, "Computing Antebellum Turnout: Methods and Models," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 16 (Spring 1986): 579–611, and, in response, Walter Dean Burnham, "Those High Nineteenth-Century American Voting Turnouts: Fact or Fiction?" *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 16 (Spring 1986): 613–44.

42. Edward Pessen, "We Are All Jeffersonians, We Are All Jacksonians; or, A Pox on Stultifying Periodizations," *Journal of the Early Republic* 1 (Spring 1981): 25. See, for example, Philip J. Ethington, *The Public City: The Political Construction of Urban*

Life in San Francisco, 1850–1900 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001). Richard Franklin Bensel, *The American Ballot Box in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), concurs in the importance that Altschuler and Blumin attach to the role of party agents as mediators between voters and politicians but is more positive about the implications of this relationship for democracy.

43. Harry L. Watson, “Humbug? Bah! Altschuler and Blumin and the Riddle of the Antebellum Electorate,” *Journal of American History* 84 (December 1997): 890. See also Mark E. Neely Jr., *The Boundaries of American Political Culture in the Civil War Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

44. It is not surprising that Altschuler and Blumin reach this conclusion given that they explicitly exclude from their analysis such practices as town meetings, local elections, reform groups, and vigilante committees. Altschuler and Blumin, *Rude Republic*, 47. They have been criticized for precisely this reason by Jean Harvey Baker, “Politics, Paradigms, and Public Culture,” *Journal of American History* 84 (December 1997): 894–99.

45. These issues have been discussed in a roundtable published in the *Journal of American History*. See Ronald P. Formisano, “The ‘Party Period’ Revisited”; Mark Voss-Hubbard, “The ‘Third Party Tradition’ Reconsidered: Third Parties and American Public Life, 1830–1900”; and Michael F. Holt, “The Primacy of Party Reasserted,” all in *Journal of American History* 86 (June 1999): 93–120, 121–50, 151–57.

46. Michael Wallace, “Changing Concepts of Party in the United States: New York, 1815–1828,” *American Historical Review* 74 (December 1968): 453–91; Marc W. Kruman, “The Second American Party System and the Transformation of Revolutionary Republicanism,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 12 (Winter 1992): 509–37.

47. Formisano, *For the People*, 198.

48. Ronald P. Formisano, “The Concept of Political Culture,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 31 (Winter 2001): 395.

49. Stefan Collini, “On Variousness; and on Persuasion,” *New Left Review* 27 (May–June 2004): 65–97.

50. McCormick, “Party Period,” 287. For similar conclusions, see Pasley, “Party Politics”; Silbey, *American Political Nation*; and Stephen Skowronek, *Building a New American State: The Expansion of National Administrative Capacities, 1877–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

51. Formisano, “‘Party Period’ Revisited,” 93–120, 104, 107 (quotations).

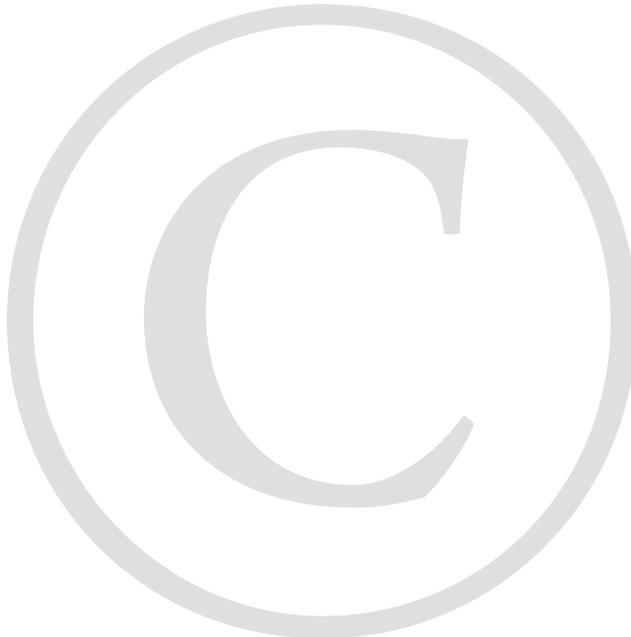
52. Bensel, *American Ballot Box*.

53. Robin L. Einhorn, *American Taxation, American Slavery* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2006); William J. Novak, *The People’s Welfare: Law and Regulation in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Daniel Peart, “Looking beyond Parties and Elections: The Making of United States Tariff Policy during the Early 1820s,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 33 (Spring 2013): 87–108. Richard R. John reviews some of these alternative approaches in “Governmental Institutions as Agents of Change: Rethinking American Political

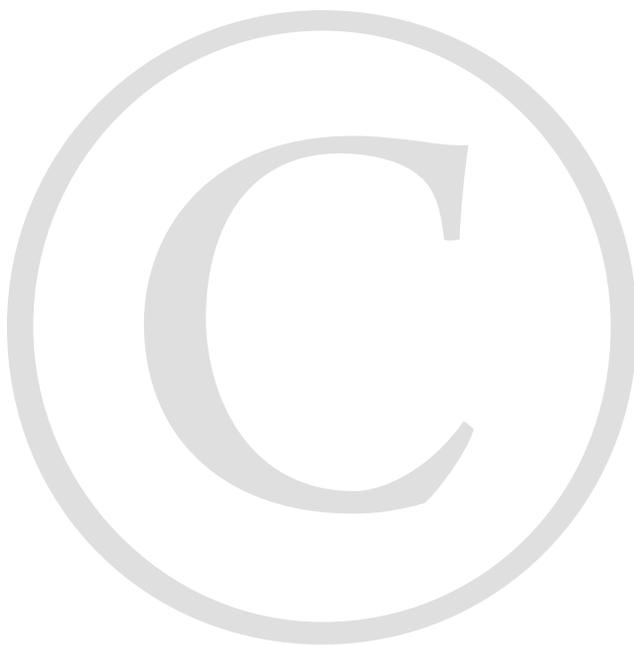
Development in the Early Republic, 1787–1835,” *Studies in American Political Development* 11 (Fall 1997): 347–80, and “Farewell to the ‘Party Period’: Political Economy in Nineteenth-Century America,” *Journal of Policy History* 16 (2004): 117–25.

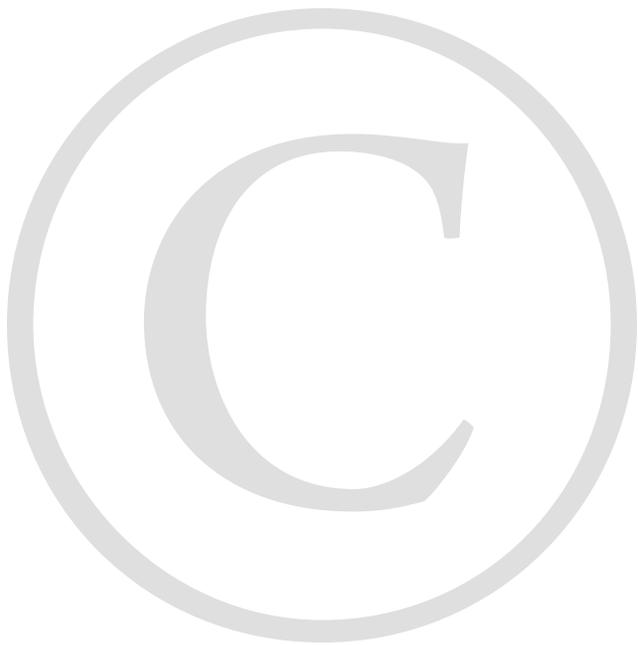
54. The phrase appeared in numerous newspapers and campaign documents; see, for example, *New York Herald*, 23 August 1856.

55. Further discussion of this emerging scholarship may be found throughout the volume, but see particularly the essays by Reeve Huston and Johann N. Neem.



★ PRACTICING DEMOCRACY ★





PRACTICING DEMOCRACY

POPULAR POLITICS IN THE UNITED STATES FROM THE CONSTITUTION TO THE CIVIL WAR

Daniel Peart and Adam I. P. Smith

EDITORS

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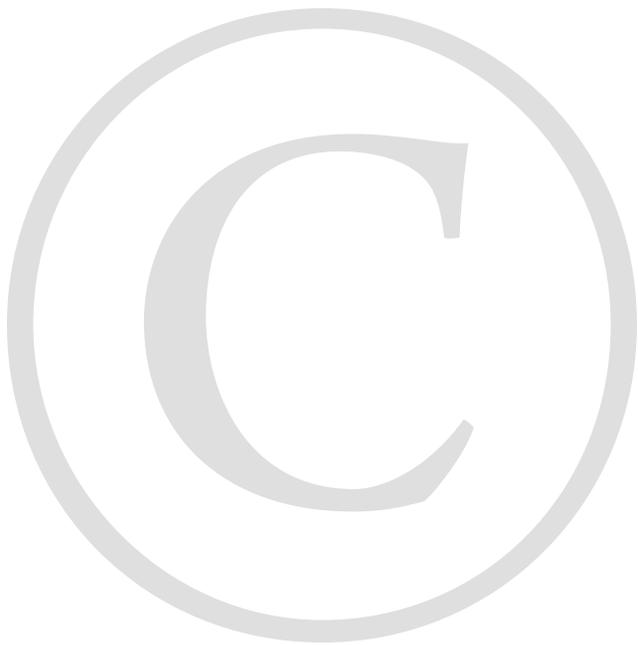
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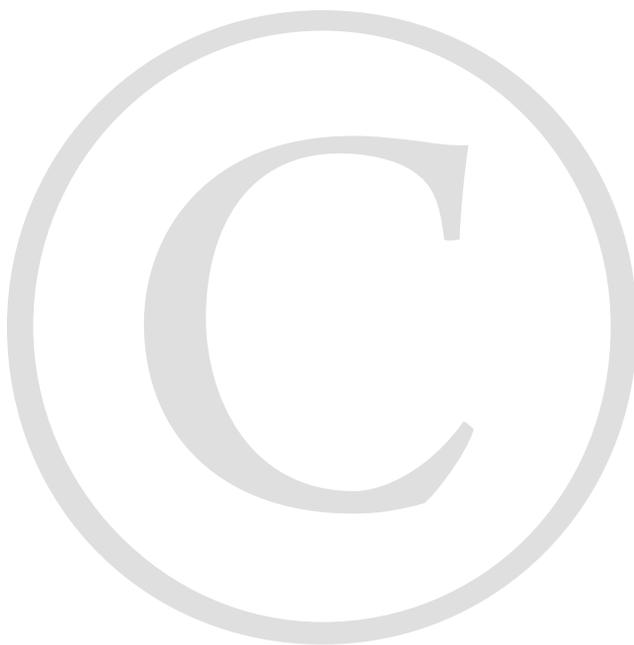
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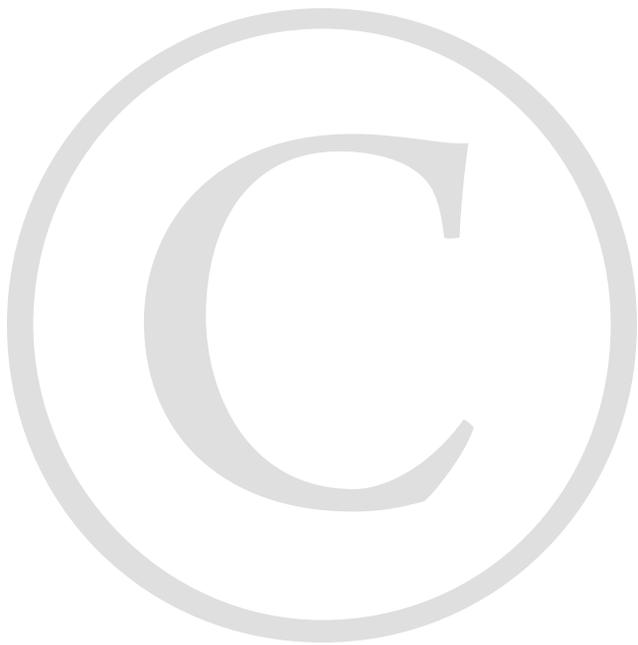
The editors would like to thank all those who contributed to the University College London Commonwealth Fund Conference 2011, “Parties, Politics and the People: Rethinking Popular Political Engagement in the United States, 1789–1860,” from which this volume developed. We acknowledge the generous financial support provided by the Commonwealth Fund (UCL) and Institute of the Americas. We are grateful to Iwan Morgan, David Sim, Jonathan Chandler, Britta Schilling, and Olga Jimenez for their assistance in organizing and facilitating the event. And we thank all those who attended and took part in the discussions, especially Erik Mathisen, whose paper from that conference has already been published separately in the *Journal of the Early Republic*.

For the volume itself, we are indebted to Dick Holway and all of the editorial team at the University of Virginia Press. Our two patient readers, Ron Formisano and Mark-Voss Hubbard, provided us with extensive comments, critical and supportive in equal measure, which made our task as editors much easier. And finally, we offer our personal thanks to the contributors, for a very pleasant three days in June 2011 and for all the blood, sweat, and tears we demanded of them thereafter.



★ PRACTICING DEMOCRACY ★





Afterword

Political history, once ascendant then deeply unfashionable, has undergone a resurgence in recent years. It has reinvented itself in part by reflecting the concerns of today's historical profession with language and identity, and in part by restating the obvious truth that we cannot understand a society that was self-consciously founded on the principle of popular sovereignty without understanding formal as well as informal power relations. The challenge now for political historians, exemplified by this volume, is to understand the interactions between, on the one hand, people, policies, and institutions, and, on the other, less tangible elements of politics like culture, class, and ideology. All historical analysis is, on some level, about understanding the relationship between "event" and "structure," to borrow terms deployed by John L. Brooke in his essay in this book. For those of us who attempt to conceptualize the politics of the United States before the Civil War, this means, among other things, working out how the practice of American democracy shaped—and, within limits, was shaped by—the agency of political actors.

One conclusion that can certainly be drawn from this collection of essays is that previous efforts to conceptualize this relationship are lacking in some respects. Over the past half century, such efforts, beginning with Walter Dean Burnham's model of electoral equilibrium punctuated by periodic moments of critical realignment, have invariably focused on political parties as the primary agents of American democracy.¹ The concept of "party systems" appeared to resolve an apparent paradox that confronted Burnham's generation: if the defining feature of American history was a consensus over basic liberal values, as Louis Hartz had famously argued, how might that be reconciled with the evident reality of the sometimes rapid and wrenching changes generated by a liberal capitalist system?² Burnham's answer was that the political balance periodically adjusted to reflect new socioeconomic or ethno-cultural

realities; tensions that originated outside the reigning party system gradually built up until they burst through the institutional dam in a “critical election,” destroying one partisan regime, creating another, and reconnecting politicians and voters. In fact, as this book shows, parties were both more and less than Burnham imagined. “Less” because they were not the hegemonic forces he—and subsequent historians—thought: other modes of mobilizing, and giving voice to, political constituencies mattered too, in varying degrees. And “less” also because, while party leaders always sought regularity, consistency, and a measure of control over the political system, this was an aspiration that often fell short of reality. Parties were not just contesting for power among themselves; the approach to politics they represented was itself part of the contest. Yet parties were also, in a sense, “more” than Burnham imagined because they were not mere mirrors of the given social relations of an era (until a critical election forced a realignment). Parties were certainly reflective—to varying degrees—of socioeconomic and ethno-cultural tensions among the population at large, but they were also more than that: like all institutional arrangements, they developed their own distinctive agendas, and played an important part in defining the realms of the politically possible.

The clarity and coherence offered by grand narratives such as realignment theory is illusory, but the danger in rejecting such narratives is that we are all too easily left with a historical brand of nominalism in which politics becomes no more than a series of contingent events with the unchecked agency of political actors generating constant flux. Scholars of a systematizing bent find the study of politics by historians frustrating for precisely this reason; certainly, close contextualization and specificity is necessary, but it is also incumbent on us to try to make sense of change through time. This book offers some illustrations of how that might be done. The story that emerges here is one of Americans experimenting with different ways of maximizing their political capability. The American Revolution, building on a tradition of self-government in the colonial period and channeling powerful ideas about liberty, opened up the potential for the participation in government-making of almost all white men and, with important limits, some other members of society, too. In the early nineteenth-century world, this presented a breathtakingly original template for nationhood. We have not attempted to track the ups and downs, the “ins” and “outs,” of politics in this period, focusing primarily on the practice of politics rather than its outcomes. But the practice was itself, in

an important sense, also the outcome, since so much of it involved defending, extending, or defining the nature of the democratic polity. Practicing democracy, in the variety of forms set out in these pages, was, to a great extent, what politics was about.

Taken together, the essays here suggest several directions for future research. The first is the need for more study into the extent to which the political choices that shaped the development of American democracy were structured by preexisting institutional arrangements. The notion that such arrangements create patterns and expectations of behavior that influence, whether consciously or not, how people participate in politics has been embraced with some enthusiasm by political scientists under the umbrella of “path dependency.” This concept is applied here explicitly by Douglas Bradburn in his reassessment of the origins of the United States’ first national parties, which shows how both the particular forms that they took and the more durable dualist tradition in which they operated were decisively shaped by Americans’ preexisting political experiences, both personal and culturally received. But Bradburn’s is not the only essay to highlight the influence of institutional arrangements on political choices. Kenneth Owen demonstrates that in deciding among different modes of political action during the 1790s, Americans were often guided less by their newly written constitutions than by the older heritage of collective mobilization stretching back to the revolution and beyond: what Charles Tilly has elsewhere called their “repertoires of contention.”³ And while acknowledging an “organizational revolution” as a key point of differentiation between the Jeffersonian and Jacksonian political landscapes, Reeve Huston nonetheless cautions against any characterization of the latter as “a single, more or less unitary democracy, centered on partisan mobilization,” when in reality it remained subject to variations in circumstance, alliances, and arrangements that long predated its formation. Meanwhile, John L. Brooke offers an alternative perspective on this approach, by investigating under what conditions existing institutions, in his case the Whig and Democratic parties, might lose their power to structure political choices in a moment of “liminal rupture.”

Huston’s chapter also points to the importance of local context in shaping both the nature and meaning of political activity that was national in scope. This is a theme that recurs throughout the volume, and is surely deserving of further study. Indeed, it is impossible for a single collection of essays

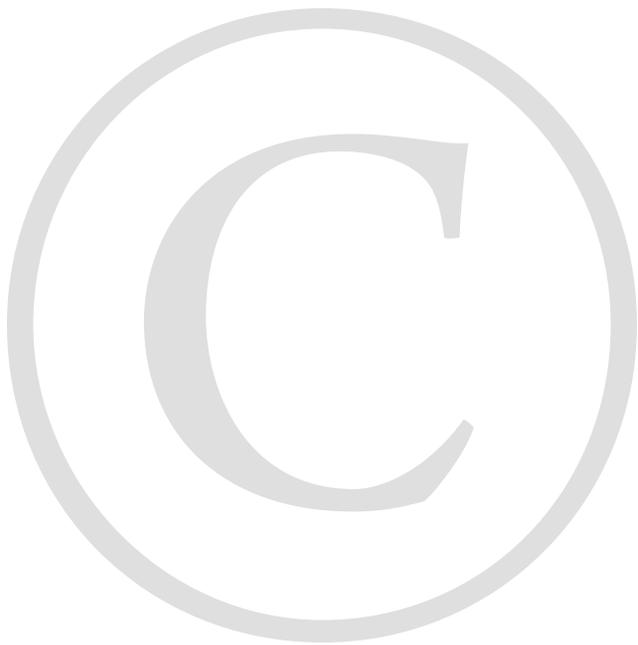
such as this to detail comprehensively the numerous regional variations that made up the patchwork of American democracy during this period.⁴ Yet still, there are indications here of how such research might proceed. Andrew W. Robertson complicates the conventional narrative of a nationwide trajectory toward universal manhood suffrage during the first decades of the nineteenth century by detailing the ways changes to suffrage requirements were decided on a state-by-state basis, with local considerations the primary determinant. Daniel Peart performs a similar task for political parties, showing how the relationship between party organization and popular participation was profoundly conditioned by the circumstances in which it took place. And both Andrew Heath and Tyler Anbinder demonstrate, in different ways, the impact of class and ethnic divisions on the practice of democracy amid antebellum communities.

Finally, there is a need to better understand how the pursuit of specific and tangible outcomes, a category that includes but also transcends the distributive policymaking identified by Richard L. McCormick, shaped the practice of democracy.⁵ In virtually every essay in this volume, we find examples of Americans pursuing such outcomes, whether in relation to issues at the top of the national agenda, as in the cases of the Hamiltonian financial program (Bradburn), the Jay Treaty (Owen), the Second Bank of the United States (Peck), and the Fugitive Slave Act (Brooke); state-specific concerns, such as the right to vote in New Jersey (Robertson) and the legal status of slavery in Illinois (Peart); or local matters, like the distribution of patronage in New York City (Anbinder) and the ratification of a new municipal charter in Philadelphia (Heath). The essays by Robertson and Peck, in particular, remind us that while we have emphasized the role that party systems play in defining and directing political activity, we must also acknowledge how far political activity in pursuit of specific and tangible outcomes determines the waxing and waning of party competition. “Party,” to update Ronald P. Formisano’s formulation, is neither a wholly dependent nor a wholly independent variable.⁶ In this respect, Johann N. Neem’s essay provides an especially fitting end to the volume, with its plea for a redirection of future research away from the quantity and quality of political engagement in the electoral sphere, on which so much has been written over the past half-century, and toward what he calls “capability,” that is, the extent to which “ordinary people could affect the outcomes of political deliberation and policymaking.” Such a project would combine the sum of our existing knowledge of parties and elections, the staples of traditional political

history, with the findings of an emerging scholarship on civil society broadly defined, in the service of meeting Walt Whitman's challenge cited in our introduction: to better understand the practice, and the meaning, of democracy in the United States from the Constitution to the Civil War.

Notes

1. Walter Dean Burnham, "Party Systems and the Political Process," in *The American Party Systems: Stages of Political Development*, ed. William Nisbet Chambers and Walter Dean Burnham (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 277–307.
2. Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Harcourt, 1955).
3. Charles Tilly, "Repertoires of Contention in America and Britain, 1750–1830," in *The Dynamics of Social Movements: Resource Mobilization, Social Control, and Tactics*, ed. Mayer N. Zald and John D. McCarthy (Cambridge, Mass.: Winthrop, 1979).
4. For a recent volume that discusses one such set of regional variations, see William A. Link et al., eds., *Creating Citizenship in the Nineteenth Century South* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2013).
5. Richard L. McCormick, "The Party Period and Public Policy: An Exploratory Hypothesis," *Journal of American History* 66 (September 1979): 279–98.
6. Ronald P. Formisano, "Deferential-Participant Politics: The Early Republic's Political Culture, 1789–1840," *American Political Science Review* 68 (June 1974): 483.



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