

Practicing Democracy: Popular Politics in the United States From the Constitution to the Civil War

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Review

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Peart, Daniel and Smith, Adam I.P.. *Practicing Democracy: Popular Politics in the United States from the Constitution to the Civil War.* University of Virginia Press, \$49.50 ISBN 9780813937700

Understanding Antebellum Political Parties

Traditional examinations of Early Republic politics that focus on the ties between political parties and the growth of democracy have languished in the past two decades. In part, this is due to the belief that while much work has been undertaken on the era's political culture, there is nothing new to say about party politics. In this important collection of essays, editors Daniel Peart and Adam I.P. Smith clearly demonstrate that much fertile ground waits for historians who want to understand how antebellum parties developed and how the American party system collapsed in the secession winter of 1860-61.

The editors seek to address three sets of issues: "periodization and party development"; "the relationship between political parties and popular participation"; and "the place of parties in American political life" (7-8, 10). They argue that taken collectively, the contributors alter our thinking about the era's politics in several ways. At the heart of this transformation is the definition of democratic politics and the roles played by parties and voters. Peart and Smith conclude that change within Early Republic politics came from a constantly negotiated relationship between formal political parties and the informal practices and organizations of voters.

The book is divided into four parts. The first section, comprised of essays by Douglas Bradburn, Reeve Huston, and John L. Brooke, addresses party development. Bradburn reminds readers that "it was differences over the rules of the game that would create the original polarization in Congress—and ultimately drive the formation of the original parties" (26). He also urges us to remember that pre-Revolutionary political parties existed within the British empire and provided continuity in the new United States. Huston gives a sneak preview of

his current book project, which examines U.S. political practices between 1812 and 1840. He combines historiography with new research to argue that “partisan democracy emerged over a long period between 1790 and 1840” (53). He also notes that while “before the War of 1812 partisan mobilization was the only democratic movement with staying power, the Jacksonian era gave rise to multiple democracies, each championing a different set of political practices and ideals” (64). Brooke seeks to identify when “a *decisive strategic bloc* in northern opinion coalesce[d] around a party” that challenged the slaveholding republic founded in Philadelphia in 1787 (73). He contends that the 1848-1856 period saw this emergence in the Republican party, and it came not just from formal politics but also from literature (Harriet Beecher Stowe and Stephen Foster) and petitions to Congress.

The second section, “Parties and Participation,” includes essays by Andrew W. Robertson, Peart, and Graham A. Peck. Robertson uses voting data from the A New Nation Votes (ANNV) project to highlight the fractured nature of Jeffersonian politics. As he puts it, “the first party system was in actuality twenty-four state party systems” (100). He also emphasizes the extent of political participation in non-presidential and non-congressional elections prior to 1828, which often compared to or exceeded the high rates usually considered to have appeared first in the Jacksonian period. Along those same lines, Peart also employs ANNV data to argue that the so-called Era of Good Feelings was an Era of Experimentation. Instead of “the conventional view that most citizens simply lost interest in politics” between the end of the War of 1812 and the 1824 presidential election, he finds that U.S. voters were deeply engaged at the local and state levels (123). “Two-party competition on a national scale, then, cannot have provided the catalyst for mass participation in politics during the early 1820s,” he concludes (127). Peck uses Illinois as a test case to demonstrate that “party loyalties were less entrenched than is often acknowledged” and that the party system “was at root unstable, changing dynamically to reflect voters’ interests and judgments” (145).

Section three considers the place of parties in American politics. Kenneth Owen’s essay considers “the extra-governmental political institutions, often local in nature, through which ordinary citizens were able to constrain the actions of officials in higher levels of government” (174). He argues that Americans used a number of mechanisms, including town meetings, petitions, public demonstrations, and civil disobedience, to effect change. While “action in the name of an individual or a self-interested group was illegitimate,” Owen

suggests, "action in the name of a community was the expected goal of a republican society" (175). Tyler Anbinder explores the ways in which immigrants, particularly New York German and Irish Catholics, participated in the political process. He concludes that while these groups were large in number, they exerted little influence within the parties and had little interest in the predominant political issues that enveloped native-born Americans in the 1850s. Andrew Heath looks at the movement for a new city charter in antebellum Philadelphia as "a critique of the way politics was practiced in a metropolis undergoing rapid social and economic change" (224).

Johann N. Neem offers a concluding essay that ties together the book's contributions and offers ideas for future research. Anyone who reads this book will agree with his conclusion that "what we now need to know is the extent to which parties encouraged or discouraged Americans' political capabilities" (268). Combined with the contributors' identification of a number of different research avenues to pursue, Neem's suggestions of looking more closely at associational societies, local politics, party activists, and patronage machines, as well as examining how parties kept voters engaged, should inspire more work on a topic that is far from exhausted.

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