

### Party Over Section: The Rough and Ready Presidential Election of 1848.

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## Review

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**Silbey, Joel H.** *Party Over Section: The Rough and Ready Presidential Election of 1848.* University Press of Kansas, \$34.95 ISBN 9780700616404

### Three-Party Election

Joel H. Silbey has been a prolific and influential historian of nineteenth-century United States political history. His seminal works, *The Partisan Imperative: The Dynamics of American Politics Before the Civil War* (1985) and *The American Political Nation, 1838-1893* (1991), asked scholars to consider what motivated voters to go to the polls. *The Partisan Imperative* in particular was influential in its argument for considering ethnocultural factors over sectional considerations in antebellum political activity.

Not surprisingly, Silbey's latest work follows the same argument. A volume in the University Press of Kansas's American Presidential Elections series, *Party Over Section* contends that while sectionalism was a significant issue in the presidential election of 1848, Whigs and Democrats "brought forward other issues rooted in economic, cultural, and ideological differences that had divided the country for twenty years" (xii). Democratic delegates to the national convention in Baltimore, for example, constructed a political platform that echoed previous conventions: limited government, low tariffs, and opposition to a national bank. Mention was also made of the party's opposition to congressional interference with slavery, to the dissatisfaction some southern delegates, who wanted a stronger statement. Whigs, meanwhile, avoided a platform altogether at their convention in Philadelphia, focusing instead on their candidate, General Zachary Taylor. They emphasized his character, strength, and leadership, especially in contrast to the alleged duplicity of the sitting Democratic president, James K. Polk, in starting and waging the war against Mexico that had begun in 1846.

There was another political party in the 1848 race, however, one whose presence has led historians to focus on the sectionalism of the election: the Free Soil Party. A group of predominantly New York Democrats, concerned with their party's lack of attention to the issue of slavery's expansion in the western territories, initially organized the party and nominated Martin Van Buren as their presidential standard-bearer. Antislavery Whigs in Massachusetts joined the movement almost immediately. The Free-Soilers demanded that the voters give slavery and sectionalism the attention that the two major parties had not.

Silbey takes issue with historians who have emphasized the Free-Soilers' influence on the election. While acknowledging that sectionalism was a factor in the election, he reminds readers that "[t]he situation in 1848 was a nuanced one" that defies characterization by just one political issue (153). In his estimation, while political elites had become more attuned to the nation's growing sectional divide, they were not "able to mobilize the rank-and-file U.S. voters to embrace the cause and either confront slavery head on or defend it all out regardless of other interests" (153-154). In analyzing the quantitative election data, Silbey finds two factors that affected the outcome of this election: partisan loyalty and abstentions. Voters in the 1848 election tended to stay true to their party, stifling the inroads that the Free-Soilers attempted to make. Additionally, while overall voter participation dropped significantly from 1844, Whig voters turned out in higher numbers than Democrats. These factors, however, were not decisive, according to Silbey. He concludes that the switch of the normally Democratic Pennsylvania to the Whig column determined the election. Economic depression in regions of the state that were typically Democratic strongholds led to desertions and abstentions among the party faithful that allowed the Whigs to take the state and, thereby, the presidency.

One is hard-pressed to argue with Silbey's conclusions, but some aspects of his supporting evidence could have been stronger. For example, he does not engage with Yonatan Eyal's argument that the Young America movement significantly influenced the direction of the Democratic Party following the 1844 presidential election. Whether or not one agrees with Eyal's contentions, the Young America Democrats should have been addressed. Silbey's presentation of the context of the election also would have been strengthened by incorporating the international context in which it took place. He mentions the Revolutions of 1848 in passing but fails to mention their influence on American conceptions of republicanism and liberty, which clearly appeared in the correspondence of Democrats such as John C. Calhoun and Andrew Jackson Donelson (xi). Finally,

given the significance that he attaches to Pennsylvania's role in electing Taylor, a more extensive discussion of what was happening in that state seems warranted.

Setting aside those criticisms, and recognizing that this book series is intended to provide a concise introduction to formative presidential elections, *Party Over Section* has much to recommend its use as an undergraduate classroom text. It provides a brief overview of the issues and personalities involved in the election and explains clearly its importance in the development of United States politics. Scholars familiar with antebellum politics might also find it useful as a refresher on how the Whigs were able to capitalize on a divisive war to win the White House for the second, and last, time.

*Mark R. Cheatham is an associate professor of history at Cumberland University and the author of Old Hickory's Nephew: The Political and Private Struggles of Andrew Jackson Donelson (LSU Press, 2007). He is currently working on a biography of Andrew Jackson that examines his identity as a southern planter and slave owner.*