

# The Coming of Democracy: Presidential Campaigning in the Age of Jackson

Martin Hershock

*University of Michigan, Dearborn*, mhershoc@umich.edu

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## Review

Hershock, Martin

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**Cheatem, Mark R.** *The Coming of Democracy: Presidential Campaigning in the Age of Jackson*. Johns Hopkins University Press, \$24.95 ISBN 9781421425986

During a March 15, 2017 stopover in Detroit (in advance of his visit that same afternoon to Andrew Jackson's Hermitage in Nashville to commemorate the 250<sup>th</sup> birthday of the seventh president) President Donald Trump proudly boasted, "they say my election was most similar to his [Andrew Jackson's]." Later that day, in a *Washington Post* piece titled, "Trump Cites Andrew Jackson as his hero—and a reflection of himself," historian Richard Norton Smith, while not openly backing Trump's claim, nonetheless did allude to an important similarity; "American politics is all about winning the allegiance of the forgotten man."<sup>i</sup> That Trump's presidential campaign succeeded in doing this (as did Andrew Jackson's in 1828) is beyond dispute as is the fact that a critical tactic employed to facilitate this (in both men's cases) was a reliance upon cultural politics. "At a time when Blue and Red America have split into two warring tribes inhabiting two separate realities, and "debate" has been redefined to evoke split-screen cable-news screamfests," columnist Michael Grunwald recently wrote in *Politico*, "this ferocious politicization of everything might seem obvious and unavoidable. But it's also dangerous. It's as if the rowdy cultural slap-fight the kids were having in the back seat has moved into the front, threatening to swerve the national car off the road." "Culture-war politics," he notes, "are often a crutch, a look-at-the-shiny-ball distraction, an easy way to shift complicated policy debates from inconvenient facts to emotion and identity" and they now dominate the American political landscape.<sup>ii</sup>

Mark Cheatem's *The Coming of Democracy*, which examines the beginnings of the nation's turn toward cultural politics during the Jacksonian era, thus appears at an incredibly prescient moment and offers an interesting lens through which to examine both the nation's current political setting as well as the robust and colorful political campaigns associated with the Age of Jackson. In this well written and accessible work, Cheatem offers readers a detailed

account of the evolving usage of cultural politics in the elections that marked the birth of the second American party system. “Cultural politics,” as Cheatem defines them, includes the “political activities that took place outside of formal party organization and the act of voting.” (p. 2) “What sounded and looked like entertainment, things such as music, public events, and cartoons,” he continues, “held important political meaning in the first few decades of the United States’ existence.” (p. 3) That these political expressions engaged electors and non-electors (particularly the nation’s women) alike is made clear through the many examples provided by Cheatem along with, as he contends, the spectacularly high voter turnout rates characteristic of this era. Unfolding against the backdrop of the democratizing “formal politics” of the era (partisanship, elections, and voting), Cheatem contends, the “growing intersection of formal and cultural politics during the decades of the early republic, contributed to growing voter engagement in presidential contests and culminated in the Log Cabin and Hard Cider campaign of 1840.” (p. 4)

Much of the story that Cheatem relates; the lengthy and fiery stump speeches, the raising of Hickory Poles and the rolling log cabins, the rise of auxiliary organizations (such as Hickory Clubs), the raucous campaign music, the acerbic engravings and caricatures, the partisan newspapers, etc., will be very familiar to those acquainted with the political history of the Jacksonian era. So too is Cheatem’s concise description of the specific, and highly partisan, issues (the tariff, the Bank of the United States, Indian Removal, federal funding of internal improvements, the Independent Treasury, etc.) that energized the electorate throughout the period. As Cheatem notes, “from the five-candidate campaign of 1824 to the Log Cabin and Hard Cider campaign of 1840, presidential elections would witness the flourishing of cultural politics and their integration into the formal political structure.” (p. 23) It is this intersection between the era’s cultural politics and the substantive issues of the day that lies at the heart of this work. What is new in this telling of the tale, however, is Cheatem’s discussion about the evolution of these informal, cultural, campaign elements and of the process by which they became more deeply entrenched in American politics between the presidential campaigns of 1824 and 1840. Beginning as tentative and uncertain political forays shaped by the nation’s anti-party political culture, these tactics assumed more assertive and open form as the nation turned toward an affirmative embrace of partisan organization. Importantly, as Cheatem makes clear, non-voters as well, particularly the nation’s women, also became actively engaged in the

political realm during this formative partisan era. Though relegated specifically to informal political roles Cheatem makes an excellent case for the political agency of women and for their active work on behalf of candidates of varied partisan stripes throughout the period of study.

It is impossible to deny the rise of cultural politics during the Age of Jackson and their centrality to the era's electoral campaigns. It is the case, however, that Cheatem's eagerness to ascribe particular agency to cultural politics in turning the era's elections [in recounting Harrison's dramatic victory in the election of 1840, for instance, he writes, that, "The Log Cabin and Hard Cider slogan handed to Whigs by their opponents provided them with a theme they fully exploited in their campaign for Harrison. Whigs used it to great effect in these five forms of cultural politics...clearly giving them an advantage over Democrats." (p. 153)] and to somewhat superficially characterize cultural politics as tactics employed by elite partisan managers to win the allegiance of voters, also exposes one of the work's shortcomings; its tendency to disregard the now well-established case for the centrality of competing ideologies in defining the Jacksonian party system and, I would add, in imbuing the cultural politics described by Cheatem their potency and resonance. Here I do not mean the specific positions taken by various partisans and their supporters on the issues of the day; Cheatem does a wonderful job of covering this territory and of laying out the varied understandings that emerged around these issues. Rather, what is missing is a discussion of the deeper ideological divide that informed individual positions vis-à-vis these issues. Harry Watson, to cite one example, in his seminal work, *Liberty and Power*, demonstrates how the Jacksonian party system, "grew out of a contest over the relationship between the emerging capitalist economy and the traditions of republican liberty and equality."<sup>iii</sup> J. Mills Thornton III further refined this point by arguing that, "acceptance of the virtues of the national and international marketplace on the one hand and resistance to its requirements on the other implied a conception of the meaning of freedom."<sup>iv</sup> These differing understandings of the meaning freedom, Thornton contends, thus produced distinct political outlooks between Democrats (who viewed freedom as autonomy) and Whigs (who understood freedom in terms of liberation and mobility) and accordingly shaped the particular political positions taken on the pressing issues of the day. These deeply seated outlooks thus infused the cultural politics that Cheatem describes with their potency and resonance but sadly they do not find their way into *The Coming of Democracy*.

This oversight leads Cheatem, in this reviewer's opinion, to mistakenly dismiss the cultural turn he so eloquently describes and to uncritically accept Michael Grunwald's "a look-at-the-shiny-ball distraction" characterization of these informal political tropes. "Tippecanoe and Tyler Too," may be all that many people remember about the 1840 election," he writes in the book's Epilogue, "but Americans would do well to acquaint themselves with how that election illustrates the weakness of political democracy." In particular, he queries, "if the elite few are able to maintain power by distracting a much larger number of voters with the same basic, if updated, campaigning tools wielded during the presidential elections held between 1824-1840, is the United States any better off than it was during the earliest days of its existence?" (p. 176) Certainly the role of cultural politics in the Trumpian Age is indisputable. We would be very well served, however, by reminding ourselves of the powerful ideological underpinnings that animate these cultural symbols and that invite the allegiance of disenchanted American voters toward the new populism that he represents.

*Martin Hershock is Dean of the College of Arts, Sciences, and Letters and Professor of History at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. A specialist in nineteenth century American political and social history, his works include The Paradox of Progress and A New England Prison Diary. His current work is focused on the role of African-American troops in the Vicksburg Campaign.*

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<sup>i</sup> *Washington Post*, March 15, 2017

<sup>ii</sup> Michael Grunwald, "How Everything Became the Culture War: America's petty tribal arguments are now driving the bus on serious policy. Here's why we should worry," *Politico*, (November/December 2018)

<sup>iii</sup> Harry L. Watson, *Liberty and Power: The Politics of Jacksonian America*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), p. 171.

<sup>iv</sup> J. Mills Thornton III, "The Ethic of Subsistence and the Origins of Southern Secession," in J. Mills Thornton III, *Archipelagoes of My South: Episodes in the Shaping of a Region, 1830-1965* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2016), p. 6.