

Old Tip vs. the Sly Fox: The 1840 Election and the Making of a Partisan Nation

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Review

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Ellis, Richard J. *Old Tip vs. the Sly Fox: The 1840 Election and the Making of a Partisan Nation*. University Press of Kansas, 2020. HARDCOVER. \$39.95 ISBN 9780700629459 pp. 482

In this splendid addition to the University Press of Kansas's American Presidential Elections series, Richard J. Ellis revisits an election known more for its style rather than its substance. The Log Cabin Campaign of 1840, so the traditional narrative goes, introduced Americans to modern mass-electioneering principles in presidential politics. The details are familiar to most any student of the early republic. The Whigs portrayed Martin Van Buren as a foppish dandy with aristocratic tendencies, while they depicted the challenger William Henry Harrison as a common man of the people. Never mind that Van Buren had come of age under modest circumstances and that Harrison resided comfortably on an expansive Ohio estate; the songs, cartoons, and other election ephemera endured, giving this election the aura of a carnival.

Ellis gives full due to the innovative political culture that played out in the 1840 election, but he deftly illustrates its limits in explaining the significance of the contest between Old Tippecanoe and the Red Fox of Kinderhook. He persuasively argues that far more was at play in 1840 than hoopla; the eighty percent of eligible voters who cast a ballot in the election vote were motivated by more than electioneering. The lingering effects of the Panic of 1837, which had crippled the American economy, then abated slightly before worsening again in 1839, could not have come at a worse time for Van Buren and the Democrats. Just as the party of Jackson seemed to be rebounding from the depression, the economy took a second swoon that imperiled the incumbent's electoral prospects. Harrison and the Whigs capitalized on the economic malaise and narrowly won the election.

Ellis's book is political history at its finest, with careful attention to both national and state level details. He pays careful attention to how local, state, and congressional races reflected

changing political sentiments throughout Van Buren's ill-fated term in office and how the changing fortunes of the American economy impacted these contests and, of course, the 1840 presidential election itself. *Old Tip vs. the Sly Fox* also does a brilliant job of explaining how party politics worked in the antebellum era. Ellis carefully explains how elections operated, pointing to the seemingly constant stream of contests that voters participated in, even in what we term today as off-year elections. Americans in the early republic may have voted early or late, but they certainly voted often. Ellis explains the dynamics of partisan politics clearly and in terms that provide important context to the 1840 contest.

Especially in retrospect, knowing that William Henry Harrison would only serve as president for a month before his untimely death, it seems hard to understand how he became the nominee. Even contemporaries seemed to puzzle at the notion that the allegedly senile "Granny" Harrison, as his opponents depicted him, could carry the nomination. Harrison's handlers capitalized on his military record to propel him to the nomination. Ellis carefully narrates the contest for the Whig Party nomination, a unique facet of the election itself that inaugurated the beginning of party conventions as the vehicle for carrying candidates to their party's nomination. Henry Clay desperately wanted the nod from his party. So, too, did another military hero—Winfield Scott—but in the end, Harrison outmaneuvered them in the national convention. As Ellis notes admiringly, Clay could have played the spoiler by refusing to stand by the Whigs' nominee, but after a brief pity party he endorsed Harrison.

Often lost, too, amid the attention to the Log Cabin Campaign mystique is the fact that the 1840 election had a third-party candidate. Though James Birney, the Liberty Party's candidate for president, polled well under one percent of the popular vote, the presence of a presidential candidate dedicated to the abolitionist cause revealed the salience of the slavery issue to presidential politics and portended the sectional strife that increased during subsequent elections. Ellis gives full attention to Birney's candidacy and to the issue of slavery in the election.

In the end, though, Ellis rightly ascribes Harrison's victory to the economic circumstances that American voters faced in 1840. James Carville's adage, "It's the economy, stupid," applies to the 1840 election just as it did to the presidential race in 1992. Voters cast their ballots for change after twelve years of Democratic rule and after three years of a

depression that left many Americans reeling from a dramatic contraction of the economy and ready for new leadership.

Ellis has written a lively and exhaustively researched history of one of the classic American presidential elections. *Old Tip vs. the Sly Fox* replaces Robert Gray Gunderson's classic *The Log-Cabin Campaign* as the standard history of the contest between Martin Van Buren and William Henry Harrison. Every student of the early republic should read this account of how the Log Cabin Campaign was about style *and* substance.

Christopher Childers is associate professor of history at Pittsburg State University in Kansas. He is the author of The Failure of Popular Sovereignty: Slavery, Manifest Destiny, and the Radicalization of Southern Politics (2012) and The Webster-Hayne Debate: Defining Nationhood in the Early American Republic (2018) as well as numerous articles on politics in the early republic. He is currently writing a history of the uncontested presidential election of 1820. Childers was editor of Civil War Book Review from 2006 to 2009.