

Did the Election of Andrew Jackson Usher in the 'Age of the Common Man'?



MYTHS OF THE LOST ATLANTIS

One of the most persistent myths in American history is the idea that the election of Andrew Jackson in 1828 marks the first "democratic" election in the history of the United States. The dawn of the so-called "Age of the Common Man" supposedly brought forth universal (i.e., white manhood) suffrage and a truly participatory democracy for the first time in the United States.

This mythology obscures the messiness of the actual history of voting in the years following the Revolution and preceding the Age of Jackson. It reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of American voting practice that too often ignores the ways in which American democracy ebbed and flowed – in fact, was redefined and restricted – in the years preceding the Civil War. Poor white men could and did vote in unprecedented numbers in the years following the election of 1800. Free men of color voted not only in New England and Pennsylvania, but also in some southern states, including Maryland and North Carolina. Women who held property in their own right – widows and spinsters – could vote in New Jersey from 1776 to 1808.

Rather than seeing the election of Old Hickory as a landmark event in American democratization, we should recognize that it was the preceding period, from 1800 to 1824, that marked the first efflorescence of American democracy, in all its messy inconsistency. Nowhere in the Age of Jackson could any woman vote; free blacks faced increasing race-based restrictions on their voting, and in most states voter turnout in the Jacksonian elections of 1828 and 1832 never equaled the peak turnout of the preceding quarter century.

Authorized by the Jacksonian mythology to ignore the elections of the period, historians of high politics have long portrayed the history of the United States from the Constitutional Convention in 1787 to the end of the Virginia Dynasty of presidents as a bright stage upon which great men enter, deliver memorable lines, and exit. This top-down approach is understandable, given the brilliance of the group that Jefferson called an "assembly of demi-gods" at Philadelphia. It diverts attention, however, from the fact that Jefferson and his contemporaries delivered their lines to an audience of ordinary men and women. In so doing, it obscures one of Jeffersonian America's most enduring contributions to posterity: the emergence of the first truly democratic political culture in an extended republic anywhere in the world.

Contrary to the "Age of the Common Man" myth, my research suggests that the era of mass democratization began 28 years earlier, with Thomas Jefferson's election to the presidency. The years from 1800 to 1816 saw the most dramatic surge in voting turnout in the nineteenth century, and the greatest expansion of the voting universe until woman suffrage a century later.

Suffrage Expansion and Electoral Competition, 1800-1820

In the first years of the nineteenth century, the United States was already a highly partisan, deeply polarized political culture. The Federalists and Republicans were fiercely and increasingly competitive in state elections from the middle of the 1790s to the end of the War of 1812. Thomas Jefferson's election in the so-called "Revolution of 1800" was not the culmination of these electoral battles, as he asserted, but it inaugurated a largely forgotten era of intense if uneven democratization.

Many of more conservative Federalists stoutly maintained they would never degrade themselves by pandering to the masses. Nevertheless, when faced with the grim reality of campaigning for votes or facing political extinction, they responded vigorously to the challenge of expanding the voting universe. In the midst of this free-for-all competition, free men of color and women in New Jersey initially had enhanced opportunities to vote, until the institution that allowed their participation, property-based suffrage, fell victim to same democratizing trends.

Beginning in the 1790s, Republicans in the North generally supported the end of property requirements for voting, since this augmented their natural electoral

base among the lower orders. In many states, even before the restrictions on voting were lifted, unpropertied white men began voting, and state suffrage property restrictions were sometimes retroactively amended to reflect the reality of “boots on the ground” (or ballots in the box). In most cases the expansion of the unpropertied white male franchise was the result of strenuous Republican and Federalist competition for votes. What followed this extension of voting rights was remarkable: voter turnout rates in many states exceeded sixty or even seventy percent of the total adult male population.

Historians of the early republic have known about these high rates of turnout ever since the pioneering work of J. R. Pole and Richard P. McCormick nearly two generations ago. The peak figures for turnout are truly astonishing. In the highly competitive election of 1812, for example, New Hampshire and Vermont turnout in the gubernatorial elections amounted to 75 and 80 percent of adult male inhabitants, respectively. That same year Massachusetts gubernatorial turnout was 65 percent of all adult males, and Georgia’s congressional election turnout was 63 percent of all adult white men. In the year 1820, the so-called Era of Good Feeling, when party competition was supposedly at its nadir, Maryland registered turnout of 69 percent of its adult white male inhabitants in state legislative elections; in Kentucky’s election for governor that year, turnout measured 74 percent of all the adult white male inhabitants.

How do these turnout figures compare with participation in the Jacksonian era? One way to gauge the significance of this pre-Jacksonian democratization is to compare peak turnout before 1824 and again in the Jacksonian elections of 1828-1832.

[Table 1: Turnout in Jefferson and Jackson Era Elections \(click to see table in new window\)](#)

According to Table 1, only New York, Maryland, Virginia, Louisiana, Ohio, and Indiana showed higher turnout in Jacksonian-era elections than they had in the peak races earlier. The apparent voter “surge” in Jacksonian New York, Virginia, and Louisiana is partly explained by the fact that these states, along with South Carolina and Rhode Island, were the only ones that maintained restrictive voting requirements into the 1820s.

Climbing the Peaks: Presidential Election Turnout, 1808-1828

Of course, the turnout figures in Table 1 actually compare apples and oranges: state elections pre-1824 and presidential elections post-1828. Peak turnout in the Jeffersonian-era elections happened elsewhere: party competition was focused at the state level, so the highest turnout mostly occurred in state

elections. Let us then actually compare apples and apples: turnout in presidential elections. Historians and political scientists who study elections argue that 1828 was a so-called “critical” election. As these scholars have shown, most critical elections generate a spike in turnout because these elections reorient the youngest cohort of voters to ally themselves to a different political party. The elections of Thomas Jefferson in 1800, Abraham Lincoln in 1860, and Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1932 each saw a change in voting patterns that lasted a generation and also generated a sharp rise in turnout.

Table 2 shows that in the Northeast, the presidential elections of 1828 actually did not mark a dramatic upsurge in the levels of voter turnout recorded in the presidential elections of 1808 and 1812. Table 2 lists a sample of adult white male turnout (for consistency’s sake) in presidential elections in 1808, 1812, and 1828.

[Table 2: Turnout In Presidential Elections, 1808-1832](#)

The most striking thing about these figures is that in New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania, turnout in 1828 was not dramatically higher than it had been in 1808 and 1812. In the sample drawn for this table, at least, only Ohio voters surged in unprecedented numbers to the polls in 1828. Unlike other realigning elections, the presidential election of 1828 does not seem to have caused an unprecedented national surge in voter participation.

Voters did eventually surge to the polls but only after the retirement of Andrew Jackson. Table 3 compares peak turnout in the first party system and turnout in the presidential elections of 1828 and 1840.

[Table 3: Turnout In Jefferson Era, 1828, and “Log Cabin” Elections \(click to see table in new window\)](#)

The Age of the Lowest Common Denominator Man

It turns out that the presidential elections were democratized not by Old Hickory, but by his Whig knock-off William Henry Harrison, “Old Tippecanoe.” The Age of the Common Man was not introduced by the first “log cabin” president but by the spurious “Log Cabin Campaign,” in which Harrison, born on a James River plantation, masqueraded as the nineteenth-century equivalent of “Joe Six-Pack.” Though the country was still reeling from the aftermath of the Panic of 1837, Harrison and the Whigs never seriously addressed the critical state of

the economy during the 1840 campaign. Four years earlier, when Harrison was first put forward as a candidate, Bank of the United States president and anti-Jacksonian leader Nicholas Biddle forbade "Old Tip" from saying anything at all during the campaign. Biddle issued this chilling directive about Harrison: "Let him not say one word about his principles or his creed – let him say nothing. . . . Let the use of pen and ink be wholly forbidden as if he were a mad poet in Bedlam."

This marks the salient difference between voter mobilization in the so-called first and second party systems, as historians have designated the Federalist-Republican and Whig-Democrat eras, respectively. Ultimately, the "mature" second party system surpassed its predecessor in mobilizing sheer numbers of voters to the polls, but at what cost? The Federalists did their best to make Thomas Jefferson's character and religious views the major issues of 1796, 1800, and 1804, but debates over foreign policy, trade policy, military spending, separation of church and state, and domestic repression clearly predominated, and almost did the Federalists in. As Philip Lampi will point out later in this series, it was Jeffersonian policy errors, especially the Embargo and the War of 1812, that eventually let the Federalists restore their electoral competitiveness.

Even in the popular political culture that was used in campaigns, the politics of the age of Jefferson seems mostly driven by the issues. The electioneering rhetoric, the rituals, and the songs associated with the Republican and Federalist parties centered on critical questions before the voters.

The Jacksonian era that began in 1828 marks a transitional phase from substantive to symbolic politics, with Jackson's opponents smearing his staid but supposedly bigamous marriage and launching more justifiable character attacks against his record as a military commander. It was the later second party system, the Harrisonian era, that marked the nadir of serious public discussion. The high turnout in 1840 was not generated by a debate or even metaphorical battle over the issues, but by the first fully "symbolic" campaign in American history. The substantive partisan newspapers that had done much of the political heavy lifting in the Jeffersonian era were supplanted for the first time in 1840 by sloganeering campaign-only rags like the *New York Log Cabin* of Horace Greeley.

By examining two popular campaign songs from the elections of 1800 and 1840, we see the transformation clearly. The first election song, "[Jefferson and Liberty](#)," was written as an attack on the repressive Alien and Sedition Acts, which the song calls the "Reign of Terror." Here is the last stanza and chorus:

From Georgia up to Lake Champlain
From seas to Mississippi's shore;
Ye sons of freedom loud proclaim,
The Reign of Terror is no more.

Rejoice-Columbia's sons, rejoice!

To tyrants never bend the knee;
But join with heart, and soul and voice
For JEFFERSON and LIBERTY.

A very different form of "attack music" appeared in the election of 1840. One Democratic "hit" was a song called "Rock-A-Bye Baby, Daddy's a Whig." The entire song is an assault on Harrison's personality. He is a "fake": the song attacks his war record and his consumption patterns. Harrison exaggerated his war heroism; he would swallow the fancy liquor of his Tidewater forbears rather than drink the hard cider of western frontiersmen. In this song and others like it, the politics of identity, with references to class and consumption, have obliterated references to policy.

Rock-A-Bye Baby, when you awake,
You will discover Tip is a fake.
Far from the battle, war cry and drum,
He sits in his cabin, drinking that rum.

Our whole trajectory of American democratization has got it wrong by celebrating Andrew Jackson as the avatar of American democracy. In fact, all of the elements that we celebrate in our political culture – mass participation, popular deliberation, substantive discussion of policy alternatives – were launched and in place in the age of Jefferson. Electoral gimmickry and substanceless campaigns dominated by fake identity politics – elite men masquerading as commoners – all awaited the election of a doddering hero from a dubious battle.

American democracy has never entirely recovered from this fateful turn from issue-based to identity politics. Our form of democratic politics assumed its familiar idiosyncratic form, incomprehensible to the rest of the world, and has persisted as our other "peculiar" institution ever since.

FURTHER READING

Among the works most heavily informing the discussion above are: Walter Dean Burnham, *Critical Elections and the Mainsprings of American Politics* (New York: Norton, 1970); David Hackett Fischer, *The Revolution of American Conservatism: The Federalist Party in the Age of Jeffersonian Democracy* (New York: Harper, 1965); Alexander Keyssar, *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States* (New York, Basic, 2000); Jeffrey L. Pasley, Andrew W. Robertson, and David Waldstreicher, eds., *Beyond the Founders: New Approaches to the Political History of the Early American Republic* (Chapel Hill:

University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Andrew W. Robertson, "'Look on This Picture! . . . And On This!!!': Nationalism, Localism and Partisan Images of Otherness in the United States, 1787-1820," *American Historical Review* 106 (2001): 1263-1280; Byron E. Shafer, and Anthony J. Badger, eds., *Contesting Democracy : Substance and Structure in American Political History, 1775-2000* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2001); Chilton M. Williamson, *American Suffrage : From Property to Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960); and Rosemarie Zagari, *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007). For pioneering examinations of early American voter turnout statistics, see J. R. Pole, *Political Representation in England and the Origins of the American Republic* (London: St. Martin's, 1966), pp. 543-64; and Richard P. McCormick, "New Perspectives on Jacksonian Politics," *American Historical Review* 65 (1960): 292-301.

This article originally appeared in issue 9.1 (October, 2008).

Andrew W. Robertson, City University of New York