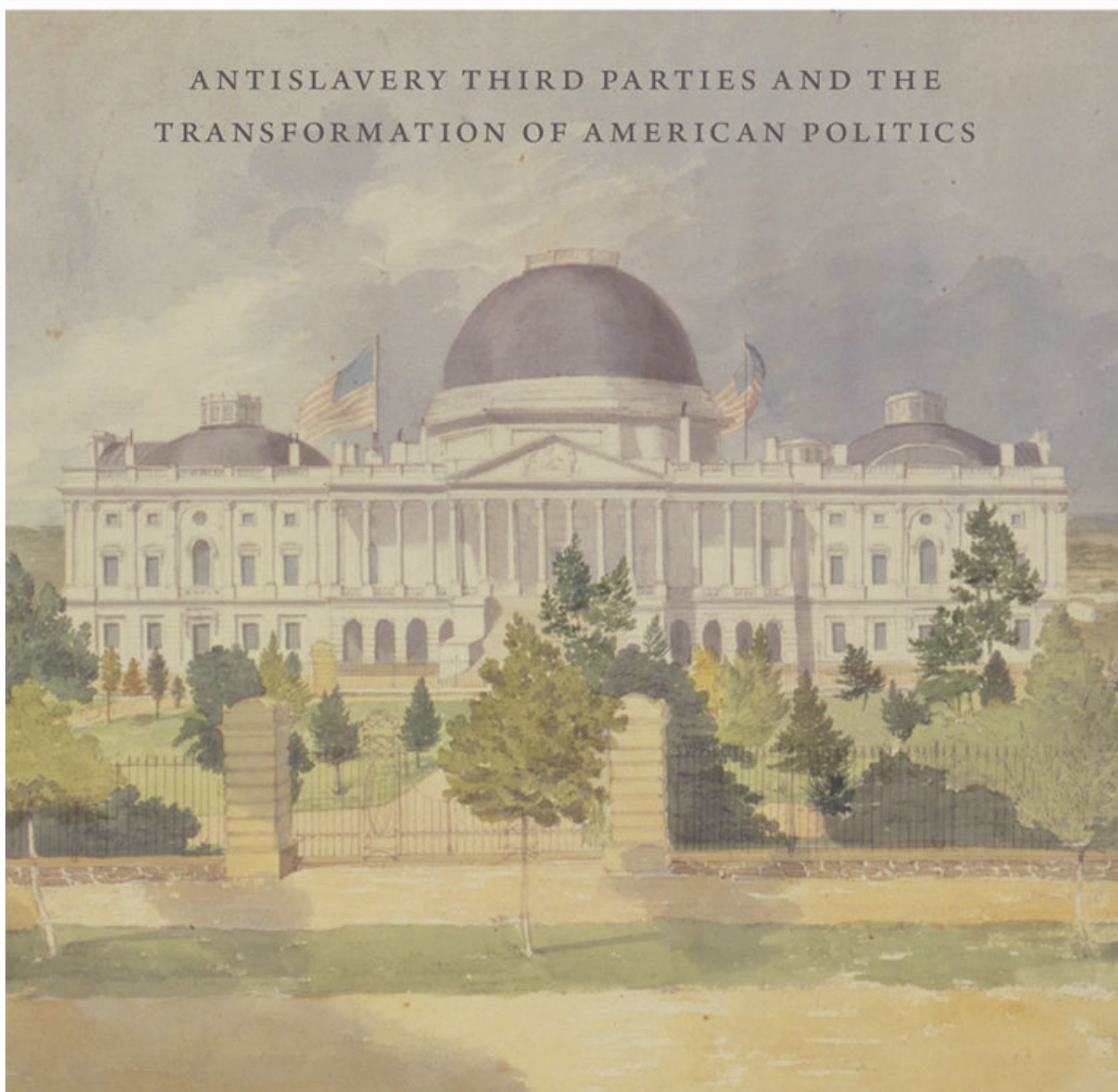


[#FeelTheBirney](#)

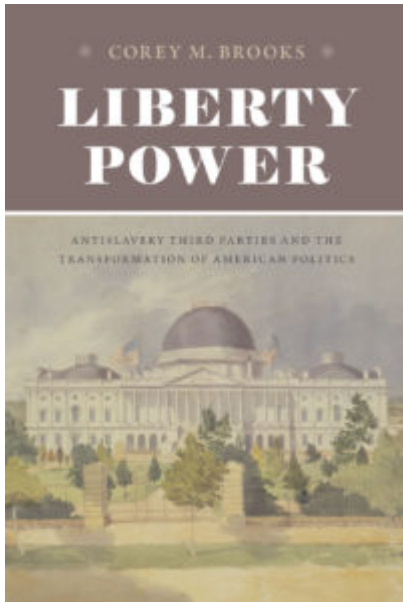
☀ COREY M. BROOKS ☀

# LIBERTY POWER

ANTISLAVERY THIRD PARTIES AND THE  
TRANSFORMATION OF AMERICAN POLITICS



“Today elections for speaker of the House are quick and uneventful” (1). So begins the second paragraph of Corey Brooks’s brilliant new book on antebellum political abolitionists—a paragraph undoubtedly drafted prior to October 2015, when the resignation of John Boehner as Speaker engulfed the House of Representatives in turmoil. When thirty arch-conservatives refused to endorse Boehner’s hand-picked successor, Republican officials began a month-long scramble to find an acceptable candidate. The turmoil abated only when Paul Ryan, who had previously declined the position, agreed to stand for election.



Corey M. Brooks, *Liberty Power: Antislavery Third Parties and the Transformation of American Politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016. 336 pp., \$45.

In the months since, Americans have only grown more accustomed to the myriad ways that dissident tails within the Democratic and Republican parties can wag, respectively, the donkey or the elephant. The use of parliamentary tactics to threaten government shutdowns or delay the appointment of judges and officials has become, for better or worse, a familiar part of congressional politics. In the House, such tactics on the part of the Republican majority have also led Democrats to embrace creative new forms of protest, as when legislators calling for the reform of the nation’s gun laws joined Congressman John Lewis in a day-long “sit-in” on the House floor.

Comparing the present to the antebellum past can be perilous, but in this case recent events may help prepare readers to grasp Brooks’s central arguments in *Liberty Power* about the influence of antislavery third parties on the coming of the Civil War. In 2016, for example, it is hard to deny Brooks’s point that “members of Congress have often powerfully influenced national political history by ‘taking stands’ intended more for swaying public opinion than for affecting the disposition of particular legislation” (48). This insight, applied to the antebellum period, keys Brooks’s convincing account of how even

small numbers of political abolitionists in the Liberty Party and its descendants managed to melt down the major parties and forge something new in American politics. For Brooks, antebellum political abolitionists—not the Populists, not the Progressives—deserve to be remembered as “the most important third-party movement in American history” (225).

Richard Hofstadter once compared American third parties to bees that die as soon as they sting. But many historians have implied that the abolitionist Liberty Party died even before it stung. Founded in 1840, the Liberty Party’s candidate for president, James G. Birney, won only 7,000 votes that year, and its proportion of the presidential vote in 1844—the last year it fielded a nominee—was similarly minuscule. Even critics of the Liberty Party would concede that these returns say less about abolitionists’ failures than about the overweening strength of the Whig and Democratic parties. Historians of other radical groups like the Garrisonians have often scorned abolitionists who attempted to win election as compromisers. And with the exception of a few scholars like Richard H. Sewell and, more recently, James Oakes, historians of the Free Soil and Republican parties have traced their rise not to the simon-pure abolitionist commitments of the Liberty Party, but instead to less elevated concerns over white Northerners’ civil liberties or the territorial expansion of slavery.

In *Liberty Power*, Brooks persuasively challenges these previously dismissive views of the accomplishments of abolitionist politicians like Joshua Giddings and Seth Gates, who once called the leading Whig, Henry Clay, as “rotten as a stagnant fish pond on the subject of slavery” (69). Together with their colleagues outside of Congress, who included former slaves like Henry Bibb and pugilistic journalists like Joshua Leavitt, political abolitionists were primarily responsible, Brooks argues, for the development and deployment of the “Slave Power” thesis that slaveholders had a disproportionate influence on the federal government—a thesis that some other historians have instead traced to Jacksonian anti-bank and anti-aristocratic rhetoric. Moreover, says Brooks, political abolitionists pioneered a coherent and politically innovative analysis of the ways that the two-party system built by Whigs and Democrats served the Slave Power. Far from making a compromising peace with the two major parties, their mission from the beginning was to explode the major cross-sectional parties and create a Northern party determined to defeat the Slave Power.

Among Brooks’s most original contributions is his focus on the House of Representatives as “the pivotal battleground” in this insurgent war against the Whigs and Democrats (13). Nineteenth-century activists did not have the same social media bullhorns available to outsider movements today, though they undoubtedly would have taken full advantage of hashtags and memes if such things had existed. (#FeelTheBirney? #NeverClay?) Abolitionists knew that Americans closely watched events in the House of Representative, and newspapers often reprinted lengthy excerpts of speeches and proceedings on the floor. Liberty Men therefore relied heavily on theatrical and “disruptive dilatory

tactics” that agitated the House, embarrassed major party leaders, and—most importantly—made news (54).

The strategies that political abolitionists used to agitate the House predated the formation of the Liberty Party. Most famous were the attempts by former president and Massachusetts Representative John Quincy Adams to present petitions discussing slavery, in defiance of an 1836 “gag rule” forbidding the reception of such petitions by the House. On one occasion, Adams incensed congressmen in both parties by attempting to read a petition from slaves, only to reveal—after an apoplectic reaction from Southern congressmen—that the petition did not discuss slavery and did not technically violate the House’s rules.

Fighting the “gag rule” was one of the surest ways that political abolitionists, though few in number, could use the House to reach broader national audiences. But it was not the only one. Abolitionist politicians used parliamentary maneuvers like convening the House as a Committee of the Whole in order to introduce wide-ranging discussions of slavery. On another occasion, Joshua Giddings used a debate over congressional funding for a bridge across the Potomac to argue against any non-essential appropriations for the District of Columbia as long as the slave trade was legal within it. Though these less famous tactics seldom resulted in outright victories for political abolitionists, they placed pressure on Northern Democrats and so-called Conscience Whigs to break from their parties on votes concerning slavery. They also created “newsworthy” spectacles that drew attention to the concessions to Slave Power that the party system constantly required antislavery Northerners to make (90).

Of all the dilatory tactics used by political abolitionists, speakership contests illustrated especially well how a small faction in the House could expose the devil-dealing ways of the two major parties. In the thirty years after the Jacksonian Democratic Party was formed, Southerners—whether Whig or Democrat—dominated this major post, which gave slaveholders the power to shape legislative agendas and make important appointments. In “interludes” interspersed with the book’s seven chapters, Brooks highlights five speakership contests to illustrate how political abolitionists exerted an influence on congressional politics out of proportion to their numbers.

Only one of these campaigns for the speakership concluded in abolitionists’ favor; Republican Nathaniel P. Banks of Massachusetts was finally elected Speaker of the 1855-1856 House after an unprecedented 133 rounds of balloting. However, the presence of a small number of abolitionist politicians who refused to support either of the major parties’ nominees for Speaker also led to protracted contests in 1839, 1841, and 1847. In particular, the 1849 speakership contest was “a pivotal moment” in which it took 63 ballots and 20 days to choose a Speaker over the objections of Free Soilers and Liberty veterans (155).

In each of these contests, political abolitionists benefited from the fact that Speakers had to be elected by an absolute majority, meaning that even a small group—not unlike the one that more recently thwarted Boehner’s plans—could stall the House’s organization and make headlines. In the meantime, they could also place pressure on antislavery Northern congressmen who were conflicted about their parties’ alliances with the South. Political abolitionists with Liberty Party roots courted sympathetic Northerners like Charles Sumner, Thaddeus Stevens, Horace Mann, William Slade, and John P. Hale and then used famous issues like the Wilmot Proviso, as well as less famous moments like speakership contests, to place those allies in increasingly untenable positions within their parties.

In short, by slowing down the business of the House, political abolitionists both publicized their arguments about the Slave Power and slowly built the political coalitions capable of challenging it. And often, they used the same dilatory tactics to stall elections in Northern districts. Many antebellum Representatives also had to be elected by a majority, rather than a plurality, and “Liberty men did not face the substantial impediment that formal state-sanctioned ballots today present for third-party organizing” (77). By running antislavery candidates in close races, abolitionists “forced uncomfortable standstills,” run-offs, or failed elections that embarrassed Whigs and Democrats and further publicized abolitionists’ claims about their complicity in empowering Southern slaveholders (90).

By expertly exploring these and similar tactics, Brooks shows how even an embattled minority of political abolitionists “seized opportunities to control balances of power between the two parties” (78). In the process, he credits them with laying the groundwork for the Free Soil and Republican parties, while simultaneously preventing other would-be third parties like the Know-Nothings from eclipsing Northern antislavery coalitions. This is not all that political abolitionists did. Working together with black Libertyites like Henry Bibb and Henry Highland Garnet, they fought locally for the civil rights of black Northerners and promoted policies within Congress that would “denationalize” slavery.

In Brooks’s account, therefore, actively engaging in third-party politics did not require abolitionists to compromise their ideals. Instead, agitating the House enabled them to achieve for those ideals a remarkable degree of influence. The battles in Bleeding Kansas or the killing fields of the Civil War began, he argues, in less famous battles in the House over funding for bridges and assignments for committees. For it was in these bruising (if less bloody) struggles that political abolitionists did the hard work of actually peeling elected politicians, one by one, out of the grasp of their caucuses and into the abolitionist movement. Only time will tell whether the tactics of dissidents in today’s major parties will result in a reorganization of our own party system. But so far, Brooks suggests, no third-party movement in American history has been as successful as the Liberty Power in transforming politics on a national scale.

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