The Manly Sport of American Politics: Or, How We Came to Call Elections "Races"

Every four years, by the time the presidential primaries are in full swing, Americans already have been inundated with election coverage for months. Each day's news cycle dredges up some fresh development—a poll, an accusation, or a faux-pas—and pundits react by recalculating the candidates' chances for victory. Yet, despite being swamped with constant predictions of winners and losers, neither political commentators nor scholars have devoted much attention to the language used to describe these electoral competitions. That's normal, of course. The way we talk about elections is so ingrained that it has become second nature. But let's think about it for a moment. How often does a reporter get through an election story without describing it as a "race" or a "fight"? The contemporary discourse of elections in America refers to electoral politics as if it were a sport. The metaphor seems so easy and obvious today that it goes virtually unnoticed, but this was not always the case, and an examination of the metaphor's evolution yields some new insights into the sources and nature of American political culture.

Like many components of American politics, the sporting metaphor came from Britain, where it originally took a visual form more often than a verbal one. Political cartoons representing elections as horse races date back to the 1760s in England (fig. 1), and reflect the increasing intensity and expense of campaigns for office as voting rights and factional politics expanded during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. By the time of the American Revolution, electoral competition, festivity, and bribery were legendary in Britain, triggering satirical allusions to elections as horse races where the same kind of environment flourished.

American-made prints of any kind were rare and technologically rudimentary before the 1790s, and they typically took the form of allegory rather than satire. In the heat of the imperial crisis, however, patriot writers grafted verbal allegory onto the visual sporting metaphor recently invented in Britain. The radical *Pennsylvania Chronicle* described the 1768 Parliamentary election as a horse race between factional leaders. “Coming to the post” in the competition for prime minister that year were Lord Rockingham’s “Commerce,” Lord Bute’s “Pickle,” Lord Holland’s “Shaver,” and Lord Chatham’s “Prerogative,” from the bloodline of a mare named “Changeling.” Each horse’s name summarized the candidate’s political reputation in the patriots’ eyes. The most stinging rebuke went to William Pitt, who had defended the colonies in 1765, then grew more conservative in his view of the crisis after receiving a peerage as Lord Chatham. The article concludes with a prediction that “the famous horse Liberty, formerly belonging to Lord Chatham, who has since sold him, will come to the post” and win the day. Even in New England, where organized Jockey Clubs did not exist in the colonial period, the partisan *Massachusetts Spy* explained the region’s strident opposition to British policy by analogizing political and sports junkies. Residents there used their “leisure to inform themselves in history and politics,” which took the place of “horse-racing and cock-fighting [as] the passion of the New-Englanders!”

Patriot writers built on this trend by framing explicit political action as sport. Their reports frequently characterized rioters as “sportive,” “playful,” or out “to divert themselves,” enjoying “anticks” or a hearty “frolic.” These terms might have accurately reflected the motives of demonstrators who often took to the streets after drinking at local taverns. But resistance writers also carefully chose such language in an effort to downplay the danger posed by these crowds. In this respect, Revolutionary-era authors still emphasized an important difference between politics and sport—that one had more serious consequences than the other. Nevertheless, the imperial crisis multiplied and strengthened the conceptual links between the two discourses.

Then the links were buried. Once the war started, the metaphor disappeared and decades passed before Americans again talked about elections as “races” or “fights.” British satires continued to picture political events as sporting events, and English artists as well as sharp-witted writers from all over Britain came to the United States after the war, but the new nation’s “republican” political culture marginalized sport and precluded a sporting

metaphor for politics.

Fig. 1. The earliest visual representation of the sporting metaphor, this cartoon depicts the 1769 Brentford election as a race led by the riderless horse of John Wilkes, a popular political leader in London whom Parliament refused to seat despite his victory because he had not yet faced outstanding charges of libel for his satirical writing. “The Brentford Sweepstakes,” artist unknown, Town and Country Magazine (April 13,1769). Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Click on image to enlarge in new window.

Republican thought considered sport an insidious threat to the inherently fragile project of representative government. A republic’s survival supposedly depended on an active and discerning electorate, able to identify and reject corrupt politicians whose greed would lead them to undermine the people’s voice and give rise to tyrannical autocracy. The dominance of this theory in Revolutionary America prompted the country’s new governments to vigorously legislate against vice, which allegedly destroyed republics by sowing selfishness and disregard among the citizenry. For this reason, just weeks into its first meeting in 1774, the Continental Congress asked each state to ban “every species of extravagance and dissipation, especially all horse-racing, and all kinds of gaming, cock-fighting, exhibitions of shews, plays, and other expensive diversions.” Enforcement was haphazard at best, but laws against games and sports lingered into the post-war era because they expressed a republican asceticism intended to keep citizens engaged in civic affairs and willing to sacrifice self-indulgence for the common good of the community.

Given this objection to sport, you might think a savvy candidate would have pictured or described his opponent in sporting terms. But sport’s inherently agonistic nature prevented a politician from representing his opponent’s participation in sport without suggesting his own involvement. After all, who else would the pictured candidate be competing against? Moreover by the 1790s, most politicians had tied themselves to America’s first party system. Besides connoting an unseemly individual participation in sport, a sporting framework also would have implied partisan competition, and republican ideology fostered an even stronger distaste for political parties than sport. According to

republicans, parties undermined politicians' independence, steering them to secure party power instead of acting in their community's best interest. In fact, Revolutionary patriots had blamed much of their discontent with England on corrupt officials, secretive back room bargaining, and indecisive gridlock associated with the rise of partisan factions there. So, when the Federalists and Democratic-Republicans began to form ranks in the 1790s, each group claimed the other was a party while claiming it was only a party to the extent that its members refused to join their foe's sinister faction. In effect, both parties' members were "anti-partisan partisans." Again, since picturing politics as sport required picturing competition, a sporting metaphor would have implied the existence of two parties, something both of them wanted to avoid.

Fig. 2. "A Boxing Match, or Another Bloody Nose for John Bull," lithograph engraved by William Charles (21.2 x 31.78 cm), New York, 1813. Courtesy of the Political Cartoon Collection, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts. Click on image to enlarge in new window.

In contrast, illustrating America in a sporting competition with another country violated no republican dictums. Such references even bolstered each party's definition of itself as a unifying national anti-party. For example, a caricature showing James Madison in a boxing match against the king of England makes national victory a Democratic-Republican victory, because Madison was a Democratic-Republican and many Federalists vehemently opposed the War of 1812 (fig. 2). The acceptability of competition in the discourse of foreign affairs but not domestic politics led to the employment of the sporting metaphor exclusively to describe international relations in the decades following the Revolution.

As long as a strict version of republicanism informed American civic culture, sport was not a viable metaphor for electoral politics. However, starting at the end of the eighteenth century, the pursuit of commercial and political opportunity loosened the interpretation of republican dictums and resurrected

the sporting metaphor. First, by the end of the 1790s, organized sporting events began to resurface. Horse racing was justified in terms of “improving the breed” and raising the commercial value of bloodlines. Billiard tables were permitted in taverns, with the payment of a tax. Tavernkeepers also staged cockfights, “making sure that the atrocious winners drink up their winnings in the company of the vanquished.” In effect, sport’s commercial value helped it sidestep the moral objections against it. Indeed, in almost every major American city in the first half of the nineteenth century, city directories reveal a growing number of sporting venues (and their growing legitimacy, since more of them were being listed publicly).

Second, changes in the electoral system over the course of the early nineteenth century similarly opened up participation in ways the republic originally had not allowed. The number of candidates swelled as the old two-party system of Democratic-Republicans and Federalists crumbled in the 1820s. Federalist opposition to the War of 1812 isolated and reduced the party’s influence outside of New England, and a weak opposition made it harder for Democratic-Republican leaders to maintain party discipline and restrict candidacy to the party’s caucus nominees. Larger fields and a reduction of party vetting turned elections into something much more like horse races in which multiple competitors entered the contest.

Fig. 3. This cartoon pictures William Henry Harrison, Martin Van Buren, Hugh Lawson White, and Daniel Webster as horses in the 1836 presidential election. Each is ridden by a jockey emblematic of the candidate’s background, with “Old Tippecanoe” bearing a rugged frontiersman on his way to victory over Van Buren’s ties with lame duck Andrew Jackson, followed by the Southern gentleman White and the proper New Englander Webster. The title of the cartoon furthers the metaphor, referring to the election as part of the “Fall Races” at the “Union Track.” Racing events were clustered into biannual week-long race meetings, one in the spring and one in the fall. “Political Race Course—Union Track—Fall Races 1836,” lithograph, engraved by H.R. Robinson (29.3 x 44.3 cm.), New York, 1836. Courtesy of the Political Cartoon Collection, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts. Click on image to enlarge in new window.

Yet change was afoot even before 1812, as more and more states repealed property qualifications and extended suffrage to all white male adults. This process started in the west, where settlers wanted to create the largest number of citizens possible in order to reach statehood faster. Eastern states soon followed suit, for fear of losing poor white men eager to claim full citizenship elsewhere. While white men of all ranks increasingly shared citizenship, they united to protect their status by raising ever-stronger barriers against the voting rights of women and African Americans. As a result, white manhood overcame property as the defining trait of citizenship in the early republic. The creation of a polity nominally defined less by property than by race and gender also led many states to allow a popular vote to determine gubernatorial and presidential elections, rather than having state legislatures select these officers. In sum, the links between sport and politics reappeared when legitimate sporting events returned alongside a new electoral system that fomented unprecedented competition for votes from a larger—if more rigidly—white male electorate.

The new electoral system motivated candidates to electioneer on a grander scale than ever before. They spent thousands of dollars to fund more friendly newspapers, more campaign advertisements (including, as we will see, prints depicting the sporting metaphor), and more as well as bigger public spectacles, all intended to rally and win supporters. They also broke from republican precedent and campaigned for themselves. Republican thought considered self-campaigning a trait of over-ambitious and selfish politicians. Supposedly, worthy candidates did not need to campaign for themselves, as their reputations would inspire their friends to speak and vote on their behalf. But in the heat of elections involving more candidates, more voters, and positions of greater power, politicians increased their engagement with the electorate and faced damaging accusations of haughty aloofness if they did not. Especially in the western states where this new system first took shape, commentators remarked that “a candidate would be politically damned if he did not mingle with the people from the time he offers until the close of the polls.” Along with the rise of “spouting matches,” or debates, this brand of campaigning lent a new air of agonistic and personal competition to elections.

That air alone rendered elections more like sporting events, though candidates and their friends soon added to it by campaigning at the burgeoning number of sporting events and venues. Such settings were valuable for electioneering because they appealed to men across differences of rank and class. As one commentator at a Virginia cockfight in 1787 reported, “many genteel people promiscuously mingled with the vulgar and debased.” Candidates had bought rounds of drinks at taverns and sponsored community barbecues since the colonial era, in an effort to bridge social gaps and unite the voting public behind them. But starting in the early nineteenth century, even sporting events not staged for explicitly political purposes became sites for politicking. For instance, in 1806 and 1815, the annual horse races in Lancaster, Pennsylvania,

featured contestants named “Anti-Democrat” and “Little Democrat.” Later, in the throes of South Carolina’s threat to nullify the federal tariff law signed by Andrew Jackson in 1832, the president’s supporters celebrated when his equine namesake won the four-mile race at Richmond, while a horse named “Nullifier” lost the two-mile event. Jackson himself staged a cockfight against his political enemies in Tennessee in 1809, and during the 1828 presidential campaign, his supporters traded insults with John Quincy Adams’ backers about which sports were more unbecoming a president: Adams’ billiard-playing or Jackson’s cockfighting and horseracing. Nor were these two men the only politicians with sporting reputations. During the early republic and antebellum eras, almost every state boasted legislators who doubled as high-profile racehorse owners, including Wade Hampton of South Carolina, William Ransom Johnson in Virginia, Robert Field Stockton in New Jersey, and John Cox Stevens of New York. Samuel Purdy became one of the first American sports stars to translate his popularity into a political career when the famous jockey was elected alderman of New York City’s Tenth Ward in the 1830s. By the 1840s, urban politicians built on this tradition by sponsoring pugilists and staging (technically still illegal) boxing matches to appeal to rough-and-tumble working class voters. In the 1850s and 1860s, leading pugilists such as John Morrissey followed in Purdy’s footsteps and became elected office-holders in their own right. It is not surprising, then, to see Americans abandon the traditional English phrasing of “standing” for election over the course of the early nineteenth century, and begin to describe candidates who “run” for office. The race was on.

Fig. 4. This cartoon satirizes the 1838 New York City mayoral election. The artist Clay again favors the Whig candidate, and particularly mocks the radical Democrat, or “Loco-Foco” (named after the recently invented quick-lighting match) candidate, whose weak horsemanship cannot match (and is intertwined with) his fiery radicalism. In desperation, he asks for the “ghost of Sam Purdy,” the famous jockey who subsequently won election as a New York City ward alderman. Notice, too, the gambling and racial slurs among the white men in the background. “The Three Mares (Mayors), New York Course, Spring Races, 1838.” Engraved by Edward Williams Clay (signed “Shanks” short for pseudonym “Sheepshanks,” a name used by Clay), published by H. R. Robinson, New York,

1838. Courtesy of the Political Cartoon Collection, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts. Click on image to enlarge in new window.

Politicians pandered for votes both by politicizing sporting events and by applying elements of sport to election settings. Travelers marveled—usually derisively—at how “every patriotic citizen felt it a duty to spend the three election days at the county seat, betting on his favorite candidate, discussing the general politics of the country, swapping horses, or promoting the social relations of his vicinage by whipping his neighbor and then pledging him in a friendly glass of grog.” A visitor to another election wrote that “the spirit which impels these gamblers and wrestlers on the scene of action is often little better than that of ordinary gambling houses,” making elections seem “as a sort of political game or race.”

Gambling on elections was new in the early republic. Its presence reveals how the growing ties between sport and politics developed specifically to appeal to a white male electorate defined by its proprietary claim to virility. After all, the very prominence of election gambling reflected the importance of economic risk-taking to the expression of white manhood in an expanding republic that privileged white men with the vote and a stranglehold on economic power. Proponents of a more refined masculinity claimed that men required only an ambitious sense of derring-do and a strong work ethic in order to achieve success. Yet the realities of a wildly unpredictable economy left many citizens feeling like “unmanned” failures and “a great loser.” Gambling and the other sporting elements of election settings allowed the marginalized and defeated segments of the white male electorate to prove their manly courage and therefore defend their place in the polity.

Fig. 5. A prizefight between Andrew Jackson and Nicholas Biddle symbolizes their struggle over the Bank of the United States. “Set To Between Old Hickory

and Bully Nick," lithograph engraved by Anthony Imbert (32.4 x 32.7 cm), New York, 1834. Courtesy of the Political Cartoon Collection, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts. Click on image to enlarge in new window.

If bold wagers were not enough to justify the mantle of white manly citizenship, elections also invited demonstrations of raw masculinity. Politically aligned gangs, with their pugilists at the front, fought each other for dominance over polling places, and then intimidated voters and opposing politicians alike. As during the Revolution, reports said these groups fought "for the mere love of it" as much as for any specific issue or cause. Yet, in the early republic, references to enjoyment did not downplay the danger of the scene. Sport had grown so embedded in political culture that a sporting label no longer minimized the seriousness of political action. Neither would such a use have been accurate. By all accounts, working-class gang members really did enjoy proving their physical masculinity, not least because industrialization in major cities reduced their opportunities for occupational mobility and the attainment of a more reputable version of manhood. The physicality of the voting venue was both enjoyably "sporting," and a deeply serious statement of political inclusion. Although most election-goers managed to avoid a beating, few escaped being accosted by aggressive "agents" charged with handing out their candidates' "tickets"—pre-printed ballots ready to be dropped into the public ballot box in an age before secret ballots.

In essence, manly competition and confrontation were inescapable at election events, which delivered opportunities for this behavior "through celebratory drinking and parades, in addition to actual sporting activities." No wonder diarists frequently called election venues a "circus" or a "contest." One politician went further, and mused on "the joy, the excitement, the vim and go of it all." Historians have agreed, acknowledging "the manly sport of American politics" as "a separate sphere, an arena of culture where the traits deemed peculiarly and even dangerously male had especially free reign." But despite referring to electoral politics as sport, and recognizing the place of pugilism in the new system, scholars have noted sport only as a reflection or component of this environment, not as one of its sources. However, sporting events and venues had a long history of fomenting cross-class white male confrontation, dating to before the rise of the white male republic. Back in the colonial period, racehorse owner and Virginia planter John Tayloe II complained about being pushed to race his horse by challenges from "a parcel of boys, in sport," while "the fascination of a billiard-table had the effect" on aspiring Philadelphia gentleman Alexander Graydon "to estrange me for a time from my school companions and, in their stead, to bring me acquainted with a set of young men whose education and habits had been wholly different from my own" though "the more to my taste for affecting a sort of rough independence of manners which appeared to me more manly." Nor had the cross-class sporting experience changed while "the manly sport of American politics" took shape in later years. On the concourse of the local racetrack, the *Camden* (New Jersey)

Mail noted in 1845 that there was “much fighting and the usual number of bloody noses, black eyes, and cracked crowns,” in addition to “the most disgusting scenes of gambling, drunkenness, and other vices, publicly enacted in utter disregard of all law.” Into this world descended elite men such as Sidney George Fisher, who liked to leave the staid grandstand to “obtain a more distinct view of the struggle” and be “independent in your movements.” Electoral politics developed into a unique cultural arena of hyper-masculine contest because politicians borrowed from sport’s already-extant culture of masculine challenge a general model, as well as specific elements, for engaging and attracting members of the white male republic.

So, candidates turned to sport in the early nineteenth century not just because they could, but because they thought sport specifically appealed to voters in America’s new, more universally, and more exclusively white male political system. If the nature of that system makes clear sport’s function as a tool for mobilization, a rash of political cartoons picturing elections as sporting events illustrates how the sporting metaphor fit within this strategy. After decades in which only a few depictions of international affairs employed a sporting frame, the inventories of surviving period prints at the Library of Congress and American Antiquarian Society suggest that sporting-themed images accounted for roughly fifteen percent of all political cartoons published in the years between 1820 and 1860, even as the raw number of political cartoons doubled.

Fig. 6. In addition to Henry Clay and Andrew Jackson’s cards, notice the useless hand held by John C. Calhoun in the center. “A Political Game of Brag,” lithograph (copy 2, hand colored) by John B. Pendleton (23.8 x 29.1 cm), New York, 1831. Courtesy of the Political Cartoon Collection, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts. Click on image to enlarge in new window.

More than fifty percent of these new sporting-themed satires favored candidates such as Henry Clay, Andrew Jackson, and William Henry Harrison, all of whom

campaigned heavily on their status as raw western men known for their gambling, sporting, and general physical prowess (fig. 3). To be sure, the residue of sport's unsavory reputation lingered, and prevented the candidates themselves from citing their sporting backgrounds. These men only mentioned sporting endeavors when defending themselves against accusations of over-indulgence, or levying them against one another. Andrew Jackson could lift up his shirt and show off his battle scars on the campaign trail, but he reminded his son back in Tennessee to "have the Turf closed, plowed up, and permit not a Horse to be galloped upon it," knowing "my farm made a training stable of is the very way to injure me."

The candidates' backers enjoyed greater freedom. They knew that evidence of actual participation would attract moral castigation, but they also knew their man's sporting reputation could win votes among an electorate increasingly equating political participation with virility. The cartoon was an ideal mode to express superior sporting masculinity without citing participation in an actual sporting event. Yet these cartoons carried weight in the early republic only partly due to the equation of manhood with citizenship. They also pandered to the popular notion of the self-made man who needed nothing but boot-strapping initiative and self-reliance to improve his circumstances in an expanding country. In truth, of course, inheritance, networking, and limited competition laid the foundation for most successful Americans, and plenty of citizens failed to realize greater wealth or stability. Nonetheless, a constant barrage of success stories, coupled with cautionary tales blaming failure on individual shortcomings, turned liberal economic ideas of open competition and meritocracy into cornerstone American values in this period. Inherently competitive, binding participants equally to rules, and therefore determined by superior ability rather than artificial advantage, sport was a perfect vehicle for simultaneously supporting these myths and values while appealing to the core traits of the white male citizen's manhood. Indeed, the overwhelmingly white male crowds in these prints—unlike the motley population at actual sporting events in the period—indicate the intended audience. Produced in support of mainstream candidates who counted themselves among the rugged self-made men, and who opposed the more radical challenges to the myth presented by unions and third parties these images aimed to sway men away from such alternatives. The cartoons always portrayed these groups as less masculine, while radicals themselves never produced sporting-themed prints because they opposed the myths and values which the sporting metaphor and sporting political culture affirmed (fig. 4).

Fig. 7. Notice the tricky “tariff grease” laid down by Whig vice-presidential nominee Theodore Frelinghuysen to sink James K. Polk and support his ticket-mate, Henry Clay. The cartoon mocks Polk’s inability to navigate around the sabotage. “Foot Race, Pennsylvania Avenue, Stakes, $25,000,” lithograph, engraved by J. Baillie, New York, 1844. Courtesy of the Political Cartoon Collection, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts. Click on image to enlarge in new window.

Beyond encouraging voters to identify with a masculine icon constructed to represent the existing political system as meritocratic and therefore sound, the sporting-themed cartoons actually urged men to vote. While British sporting-themed political cartoons were always published*after* an election, and therefore likened the event to sport in hindsight (as part of a derisive critique of politics having become sport-like), all American versions were published *before* the elections they picture. In America, the sporting frame aimed to mobilize and influence voters, so these cartoons never showed a winner of an electoral event. Picturing their man as victorious would have told voters not to bother casting a ballot. Instead, these images always depicted the favored politician in the lead, about to win, but not yet having won. He was still in need of the viewer’s vote to seal the result. Sport had been castigated in the Revolutionary era for distracting the people from civic affairs, but by the 1820s, candidates and parties recognized its power to engage voters in the new white male republic.

Sporting-themed political cartoons asked voters to cast their ballot for the most manly candidate. Yet they also appealed to viewers by granting them some agency in figuring out which candidate that was. The early republic’s new commercial sporting industry was full of deception, or “humbug,” as period commentators called it, and part of the allure of going to an event was distinguishing trickery from truth. Participation was about identifying fraud and not being a “sucker” as much as it was about winning and losing. Crowds rioted when they thought races or fights were rigged. Game manuals always directed players to check the equipment before playing, to make sure dice were not loaded, cards were not marked, and billiard balls were accurately centered, lest they fall prey to “gamesters … who are constantly waiting to catch the

ignorant and unsuspecting." Even at theaters, as one patron remarked, "surely the pleasure is as great of being cheated as to cheat." As sport and politics fused, the same issue surfaced in campaign settings. Moralizing magazines such as *Gleason's Drawing Room*and *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* complained about "how volubly the lie is given and returned" during political events, and "the froth and scum which rise upon the surface of our society" there. This reputation even encouraged disengagement among some elites, who dismissed "the mere chicanery of politics."

A swathe of American society critiqued the humbug common to sport and politics, but sporting-themed cartoons only multiplied, and they ignored this criticism in favor of appealing to the popular interest in identifying fraudulent machination. Whether the contest was cards or billiards, a footrace, horse race, or a boxing match, sporting-themed cartoons always asked viewers to read visual and textual clues that explained why winners were winning and losers were losing. In an 1832 campaign print, "Set-to Between Old Hickory and Bully Nick," Andrew Jackson sips whiskey between rounds while his opponent, United States Bank Director Nicholas Biddle, drinks port (fig. 5). In the background, Jackson's military-clad supporter refers to Old Hickory's training under famed pugilist William Fuller. In contrast, Biddle's trainer is an overweight and luxuriously dressed woman. In an 1831 cartoon from the opposite political perspective, Andrew Jackson is about to lose a game of brag (the forerunner of poker) to Henry Clay, who holds three aces, labeled "U.S. Bank," "Internal Improvement," and "Domestic Manufactures" (fig. 6). Jackson has three of a kind, too, but, in a cutting jab at the president, he holds three knaves: "Intrigue," "Corruption," and "Imbecility." The text in these examples simplifies the exercise, but other prints simply required viewers to "read the game" and figure out who is in the better position, and why. Several even depicted cheating as something natural to the sporting/political process, which a quality candidate would overcome (fig. 7). Sporting political cartoons assumed viewers' sporting literacy, and asked them to equate a politician's sporting skill with his political skill. This translation seemed increasingly plausible amidst the changes in the electoral system and the intensified cross-pollination of sporting and political events. As one sporting-themed election cartoon's title implied, the genre assured voters that their popular knowledge of sport would help them see through the skullduggery of political rhetoric and turn the search for the best candidate into a fun and easy "sport for grown children." In this way, while the cartoons supported a mythic vision of manhood geared to limit radical change, they did push viewers to actively evaluate candidates just as they would any racehorse, rather than passively accept a politician's claims.

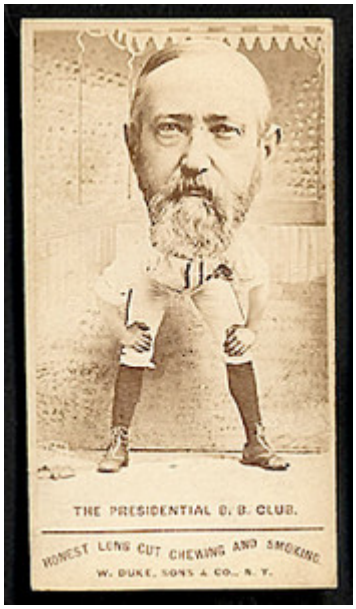

Fig. 8. Duke Tobacco printed a series of baseball cards depicting the 1888 presidential candidates as ballplayers. “Duke & Sons Tobacco Company, Benjamin Harrison,” Presidential B.B. Club Card Series (1888).

Candidates turned to the sporting metaphor to appeal to voters because it linked the familiar sporting experience, rife with unpredictable and manly competition, to a political culture that had evolved to celebrate those same qualities. Yet this appeal would not have been necessary if voters had been predisposed to cast their ballots. Although the later years of the early republic remain the high-water mark for voter turnout in American history, historians Glenn Altschuler and Stuart Blumin, among others, have shown that this turnout resulted more from a massive effort to mobilize voters than a deeply engaged polity. Few Americans outside of major urban centers participated in party politics beyond the immediate election season. Meanwhile, in urban and rural areas alike, candidates sent out wagons to transport uninterested masses to the polls. In Altschuler’s and Blumin’s words, communities were largely separated “into a politically eager minority and a politically harassed majority.” In this context, sport functioned as a lure, transforming harassment into seduction.

The sporting metaphor represented the first line of enticement. Its deployment in a variety of media, not just political cartoons, gave the electorate a taste of sport’s presence in actual campaign events and election settings. Already by the 1810s, newspapers in both big cities and rural locations like Rutland, Vermont, began to talk about candidates who had “*run* a pretty even *race*.” In these early examples, though, the italics signify a consciousness about the metaphor. They tell readers that the allusion to politics as sport is stilted. The disappearance of the italics in the 1820s indicates the metaphor’s evolution into an everyday language of electoral politics. The change illustrates how the discursive space between sport and politics had closed. Still, the metaphor remained largely a public discourse. When it appeared in

private correspondence, it was almost always tied to actual sporting events or active sportsmen. A week before the 1812 election, the curmudgeonly John Adams had attended the Boston horse races and (incorrectly) predicted to a friend that when “the Horse from New York distanced the Horse from Boston,” it “Augurs that Mr. Cinton will distance Mr. Madison in the approaching political heat.” This is Adams’ only recorded use of the metaphor, and it clearly was triggered by attendance at a real horse race. Twelve years later, when the metaphor was far more common, Washington, D.C., thoroughbred owner and politico Benjamin Ogle Tayloe described to a friend the rounds of voting in the House of Representatives, which determined the 1824 presidential election. He might as well have been writing for the country’s first sports periodical, *The American Turf Register*, which had just commenced the previous year.

> The Presidential race is extremely interesting—when the last round was entered upon, at the opening of the session, old Hickory led, closely pushed by Yankee, who soon locked him, & as they have entered the last quarter has got a half a length a head. Crawford has been losing for the two last rounds, but by good jockeying has lately gained upon the others, & if in coming in he can once lock Yankee, he may jockey him out & give the race to Hickory. In racing lingo, such is the present state of the Controversy.

Though increasingly common in the press, Tayloe’s thorough application of the metaphor was unusual in private correspondence, and is no doubt explained in large part by the fact that both he and the letter’s recipient owned racehorses. So, although the sporting metaphor solidified a conceptual overlap of sport and electoral politics, it was deployed most often in public discourse for the purpose of mobilizing voters, or at least enlivening the incessant election coverage in order to reduce voters’ sense of harassment and fatigue. The metaphor served as a gateway, speaking of politics in a way that political writers hoped would attract people to rallies, polls, and even sporting events where the full congruence of sporting and political culture was on display.

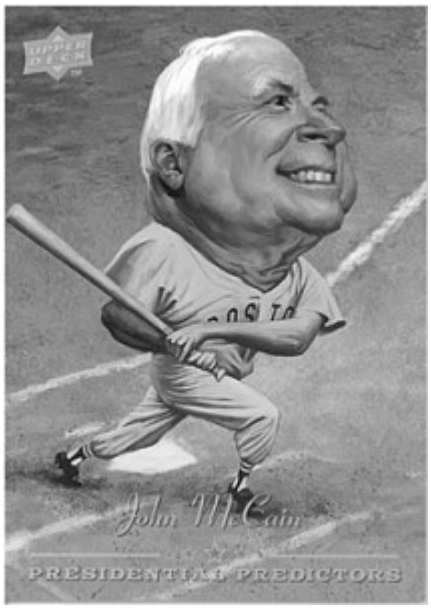

Fig. 9. In the midst of the 2008 election, Upper Deck, one of the leading baseball card makers, created a series involving the 2008 presidential nominees. Each nominee (and past candidates going back to 2000) was pictured on a card memorializing a famous image in baseball history. Thus, as with the older version of the sporting metaphor cartoons, the new ones do not merely picture candidates playing a sport, but go further and actually situate them in recognizable (and, in this case, famous) sporting settings, emphasizing how sporting and political culture have once again begun to blur. Here, John McCain replicates a timeless photo of Boston Red Sox icon Ted Williams. Lest some readers think former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney, not McCain, was better suited for this image, Romney was pictured as Boston's Carlton Fisk, waving his home run fair in Game 6 of the 1975 World Series. "John McCain," Presidential Card Series, 2008, the Upper Deck Company, Carlsbad, California.

If voter turnout was the goal, the metaphor, and the merger of sporting and political culture it represented, appear to have worked. Of course, sport was just one component in a shotgun-style approach to mobilizing the polity. Treats, bribes, coercion, non-sporting festivity, and issue-based appeals all had a place in the nineteenth-century electoral landscape. Sporting cartoons, racehorse names, and even violent gangs did refer to key issues such as the U.S. Bank, tariffs, and job creation, yet a vocal corps of reformers categorized sport with the more unsavory elements of political culture, which they thought trivialized and degraded elections. Opposition to sport had never died out from the Revolutionary era. Reformers in the early nineteenth century issued familiar cries against the "crowds of idle and dissolute persons" who lost self-control "under the influence of the delirium and excitement of the scene." Successive waves of reform magazines, newspapers, and pamphlets churned out similar admonitions in the antebellum era. These critiques resonated in complaints about the emerging political system. As early as 1798, the intense party competition between Federalists and Democratic-Republicans had elevated

gamesmanship among politicians enough to make a Connecticut preacher think that "the reins of government are thus committed to the sport of chance." Later, as more explicit elements of sport were infused into political life, the moral tone echped through the same mainstream press that expressed the sporting metaphor more often than ever before. For example, in 1828, just two weeks after referring to a candidate whose "race is run," the *Providence Patriot* wondered why

> A blustering fellow who has more money than wit, with a strong propensity for gambling, will offer to 'back his opinion' with any sum, on the result of an election—and editors of papers, who ought to possess good sense enough not to give currency to such flimsy stuff, will make a great parade about it in their papers, and fools will carp and stare thereat, as though the opinion of a gamester was of more weight than that of a sound discreet man.

Activities borrowed from sport were censured, while the strength of the conceptual link between sport and politics had, just as it has for us today, become ingrained enough to make the metaphor's use almost automatic. In fact, by the 1840s, most literature looked down upon the "vicious life of a politician," in part due to the job's proximity to the gambling, racing, fighting, and deceptive spectacle brought from sport into political culture. Nevertheless, this development did nothing to reverse the combination of sport and politics. If anything, the mixture only thickened. Reformers tended to side with the new Whig Party against the Democrats when a new party system coalesced in the 1840s. Yet, though they ridiculed Democrats for taking politically motivated gang violence, spectacle, and sport to a new level, Whigs quickly showed they were not "too much of Gentlemen to do such things" and "had a number of blackguards [a term for cheating gamblers] in their ranks to match the Jacksonians." Reformers continued to complain. Their morality became dominant in print and defined "respectability" among "middle-class" Americans, but they could not gainsay the value of synthesizing sport and politics, nor displace the sporting metaphor that advertised this synthesis.

The sporting metaphor has remained ever since. Of course, the same is not true for other sporting elements of political culture. Racehorses are no longer named for politicians or their platform planks, party gangs no longer brawl at the polls, and candidates no longer campaign by playing billiards with constituents, let alone buying them drinks before ushering them to their civic duty. "Treating" voters had been outlawed in most states since the early nineteenth century, but enforcement was weak until a century later. From the 1880s until the 1930s, the United States experienced a second significant shift in political culture, one that steered electoral politics toward the reformers' vision. Stricter registration laws, secret ballots, and stronger policing of

sober behavior at the polls resulted from a reaction by native-born Americans against the steady stream of immigrants flowing into the country, which they feared would overwhelm their political voice. Election reform both reduced the number of immigrant and African-American voters, as well as altered the nature of political campaigning and Election Day. The sporting atmosphere disappeared. Although the new laws did not require the excision of sport from electoral politics (except for bans against election gambling), such filtering occurred as candidates and parties recalibrated their tactics to attract the allegedly straight-laced and issue-based middle-class voter. In turn, they shunned the ethnic and black citizens who reportedly were the only ones motivated by bribery, patronage, and the crass lures of spectacle and sport. The expansion of the franchise to women only compounded the push for change, as women's rights activists staked part of their claim to suffrage on their moral influence, which they promised would counter the crude hyper-masculinity responsible for the country's corrupt politics. Local politicians remained invested in sporting events and venues, though they tended to hide these connections more than in earlier periods. They could throw out a ceremonial first pitch as a VIP spectator at a baseball game, but appearing as baseball players on baseball cards of their own was now out of bounds (fig. 8).

Stricter laws and enforcement limited the blending of sport and politics in practice. Still, the persistence of describing elections as "races," in addition to an emerging parlance of calling legislative debates "fights" and referring to new team sports by describing political inaction as "punting," reveals the steady strength of the conceptual link. Another representation of that link is the decline in voter turnout as electioneering drifted from the way many Americans had come to think about and experience politics. Registration requirements, the prohibition of candidate-sponsored transportation to the polls, and sporadic policing of anti-alcohol and anti-bribery statutes only partly accounted for the decline. The separation of sport and festivity from electoral culture played an important role, too. As historian Michael McGerr has noted, "through newspapers and spectacular campaigns, partisanship had initiated the young into politics, simplified public life, invested the act of voting with multiple significance, and made the vote a reflection of enduring party attachments as much as interest in issues, candidates, or close elections." People had connected to politics through its sporting elements and language. When those connections eroded, turnout dropped.

Notably, not all of the drop-off can be attributed to the absence of recent immigrants and African Americans. Middle and upper class white male voter turnout dropped by double-digit percentage points in places as distinct as Philadelphia, rural Pennsylvania, and across the state of Missouri. The number of voters engaged by the sporting elements of political culture, as opposed to the other methods of nineteenth-century voter recruitment, are impossible to determine. So are the ways these methods overlapped (by entertaining people herded to the polls through bribery or coercion, for instance). But, clearly, the growth of sporting elements in election events and the persistence of the

sporting metaphor over the course of the nineteenth century suggests some value. Candidates and parties would not have gone to such expense, and the media would not have pioneered such language, if the sporting frame was generally considered ineffective.

Indeed, perhaps nothing illustrates sport's value to political mobilization more than its return to the electoral scene over the last decade. In many ways, politics has again become entertainment, with Fox and MSNBC, as well as the Drudge Report and Huffington Post, rousing and saturating the country with the kind of acrimonious partisan rhetoric we have not seen in perhaps a century. This media blitz has been accompanied by a return to incorporating sport in politics. Half of the twenty-five former professional athletes to hold major elected office (federal, governor, or mayor of a major city) since 1900 have served in the last fifteen years, and the trend has warranted articles from CBS as well as the Wall Street Journal. Presidential candidates again appear on baseball cards (fig. 9). Even election gambling has made a comeback, becoming a multi-million-dollar industry run from off-shore websites capable of skirting laws against such wagers. Perhaps not coincidentally, voter turnout is again on the rise over the last ten years. Turnout in 2008 was higher than in any presidential election since 1958. Searching for causation from this correlation, a group of Yale political scientists recently staged "election festivals" in order to test the hypothesis that a sporting hullaballoo will improve voter turnout.

All of these developments make clear that the sporting metaphor is but the tip of an iceberg. More than just a facile comparison, it represents sport's long history as a foundational component of American political culture. Modern moralists who complain about today's media circus, or who argue that sporting events and star athletes ought to be apolitical, ignore sport's central role in engaging and mobilizing American citizens for the first century of the nation's history. The question today is what to make of this history. Do we side with the reformers, and decry (or even attempt to curb) the return of an antagonistic, hyperbolic, and kitschy sportification of politics? Or do we embrace it as a vehicle for mobilizing voters, and attempt to inject as much substance as possible into the contest? Do we live up to the metaphor, or do we continue to use it while ignoring its meaning?

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Further reading:

For the festivity of electoral politics in the successive eras covered above, see Edmund S. Morgan, *Inventing the People: The Rise of Popular Sovereignty in*

England and America (New York, 1989); Ann Withington, *Toward a More Perfect Union: Virtue and the Formation of American Republics* (New York, 1991); David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776-1820* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1997); Daniel Dupre, "Barbecues and Pledges: Electioneering and the Rise of Democratic Politics in Antebellum Alabama," *Journal of Southern History* (Aug. 1994): 479-512; William E. Gienapp, "'Politics Seem to Enter into Everything': Political Culture in the North, 1840-1860," in Gienapp, Stephen W. Maizlish, and John J. Kusma, eds., *Essays on American Antebellum Politics* (College Station, Texas, 1982); Richard Franklin Bensel, *The American Ballot Box in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (New York, 2004); and Michael E. McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics: The North, 1865-1928* (New York, 1986). Ronald P. Formisano, *The Transformation of Political Culture: Massachusetts Parties, 1790s-1840s* (New York, 1983), along with Glenn Altschuler and Stuart Blumin's *Rude Republic: Americans and their Politics in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, 2000), both describe the festive nature and sporting elements of electoral politics, but counter the dominant argument in the works listed above, which generally suggest that increased voter turnout in the nineteenth century reflected a genuinely more politically active citizenry. David Grimsted's *American Mobbing, 1828-1861: Toward Civil War* (New York, 1998) is the only work which explicitly likens all this festivity to "sport," though even he resembles the others listed here in attributing the origins of these practices to older English traditions and newer party competition, rather than the precedents set by sporting events.

On manhood, risk, and citizenship, see Elliott Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting in America* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1986). Dana D. Nelson, *National Manhood: Capitalist Citizenship and the Imagined Fraternity of White Men* (Durham, N.C., 1998); Scott Sandage, *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America* (Cambridge, Mass., 2005).

On reform and the decline in voter turnout, see Walter Dean Burnham's classic article, "Theory and Voting Research: Some Reflections on Converse's 'Change in the American Electorate,'" *American Political Science Review* (Sept. 1974): 1002-1023; McGerr, *Decline of Popular Politics*, and, more recently, Liette Gidlow, *The Big Vote: Gender, Consumer Culture, and the Politics of Exclusion, 1890s-1920s* (Baltimore, 2004); Elizabeth Addonizio, Donald Green, and James Glaser, "Putting the Party Back into Politics: An Experiment Testing Whether Election Day Festivals Increase Voter Turnout," *Political Science and Politics* (2007): 721-727.

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