

Introducing the Commonplace politics issue



Around the time of the previous presidential election, David Waldstreicher, Andrew Robertson, and I published a volume called [Beyond the Founders: New Approaches to the Political History of the Early American Republic](#). It was meant to showcase ways of thinking about the political history of the early American republic that were different from the [warmed-over, artfully scuffed-up, but deeply conservative “great man” approach](#), which had become so prevalent during an era of not-so-great political leadership and worse political journalism. Our volume did little to slow the parade of so-called presidential historians through bookstores and across TV screens, peddling their anodyne anecdotes, but it did suggest alternative paths that scholars might follow to America’s political past.

At the risk of tarring my coeditors with my own motivations, *Beyond the Founders* was also intended as an announcement that political history was back in the academic house. Once upon a time, long before most of the volume’s authors had completed grade school, much less graduate school, political history had been the king of the discipline, the subject that defined what it was to do history. This earlier brand of political history left the vast majority of early Americans out of most histories altogether, so there was little reason to mourn when that particular monarch was deposed beginning in the 1960s. Reflecting a noticeable but largely unconscious return to political topics by younger scholars and an abiding belief that the lineaments of public power profoundly affect every person in every society whether they possess such power or not, *Beyond the Founders* tried to bring back political history with a humbler attitude and a much broader base. Neither a backlash against recent historical trends nor a kneejerk response to them, the book sought to foster a more capacious and also more *accurate* notion of precisely what activities comprised politics in early America. At the same time, we tried not to forget that traditional political history topics like elections and presidencies and

diplomacy were too important to be left to the political scientists.

While this special politics issue of *Common-place* is not exactly a sequel to *Beyond the Founders*, our jokey sequel-ish title indicates its origin in the same broad project, this time made a bit more accessible to general readers. The emphasis of our special issue is two-fold: scholarly perspectives on political phenomena that connect the early American republic with the present and articles that aim, like *Beyond the Founders*, to expand readers' definition of what counts as "political history."

In the first category are most of the issue's freestanding articles. [Jonathan Sassi](#) looks at how one influential evangelical minister learned that Christianity could be even more powerful in a secularly governed nation. [Jim Cullen](#) and [Amy Greenberg](#), respectively, describe the way racism and manhood worked in the presidential politics of the 1850s and how distressingly little has changed in 150 years. [Reeve Huston](#) considers the fundamentally different models of democracy that operated in different quarters of nineteenth-century American politics. Huston finds the stark differences between the Workingmen's Parties and their antagonists during the Jacksonian era echoed in divergent strategies of the Obama and McCain campaigns today.

In the second category, we have several groups of articles that delve into areas of public life typically overlooked by a traditional political history dominated by election campaigns and presidencies. Black churches are known as a political force in modern American politics but generally do not figure in political narratives of the slavery era. [Richard Newman](#) shows us how the political culture of electoral democracy filtered into African American communities legally barred from the formal political process, as free blacks voted within their churches. Likewise, though we are all familiar with modern political battles over Supreme Court nominations, constitutionalism itself rarely registers as a political problem, leading to uncritical acceptance of the relatively recent notion that the only appropriate venues in which constitutional rights can be defended are the courts. [Ray Raphael](#) takes us back to one of the many other, more popular forms of constitutionalism that existed earlier, in this case citizens in local communities formally instructing their legislators. In a bonus article hosted at the *Common-place* political blog, [Publick Occurrences 2.0](#), legal historian [Christian Fritz takes an even broader look](#) at the almost-lost constitutional world of early America.

Then we have a [package of articles](#) on a political topic that even *Beyond the Founders* neglected, the history of the American state. At the time this introduction is being written (September 2008), the federal government has just bought 79.9 percent of the world's largest insurance company, AIG (not long after purchasing 100 percent of two of the largest secondary mortgage lenders in the world, Fannie Mae and [Freddie Mac](#)), as part of series of transactions that will effectively nationalize much of the U.S. financial industry. Thus it seems more obvious than ever that historians and history readers ignore the role of government institutions at their peril. While putting U.S. taxpayers

into the insurance business, the mortgage business, and soon the investment management business contradicts the ideology of both present-day political parties, even the George W. Bush administration finally had to admit what has always been true: that government is the ultimate guarantor of the national weal. No matter how privatized basic public functions (such as shielding citizens from financial risk) appear to be, it is government that has to take responsibility when the chips are down and basic stability is at stake. Actually government has always had that ultimate responsibility, but in recent times American leaders found it more politic and seemingly more efficient to handle such tasks through institutions defined as private businesses. Now we know better. Any notion of political history with even the slightest pretensions to accuracy and comprehensiveness cannot afford to leave the "American state" out of the picture. Our state package is introduced by the redoubtable Richard R. John, the scholar who almost single-handedly "brought the state back in" to the study of the early American republic.

Finally, bridging the two missions, we have an innovative set of articles on [the material history of the American ballot](#). This was an issue that modern Americans rarely even considered before the epoch-making Florida chads and butterflies of 2000, but it turns out to be one that cultural historians and literary scholars are uniquely suited to illuminate. The benefits of a broader political history were never more clear.

It will also be noticed that, despite the variety on offer here, we haven't attempted to be comprehensive or systematic about covering all possible facets of early American political history or even to reflect all the most prominent themes of current scholarship. We might have done more with recent research on women's political activities in early America, building on the work of historians Rosemarie Zagari, Susan Branson, Catherine Allgor, Elizabeth Varon, and others. In a different vein, readers who know [my own work](#) may be surprised to find little here focusing directly on the political press, another topic I obviously consider to be of great importance in understanding early American politics.

We also might have done much more in this special issue with electoral history, a traditional political topic that *Common-place's* main sponsor, the American Antiquarian Society, is involved with in a highly untraditional way. The [New Nation Votes project](#) aims to make available to scholars and the public the life's work of Philip Lampi, an AAS employee who has been collecting early American election returns for more than four decades, most of that in his spare time. Elections before 1828 were long considered the "lost Atlantis" of American political history because there was no complete set of election returns to study. Lampi set out to map those lost coastlines, amassing his collection by hand, from old newspaper reports and local records. In recent years, working with my *Beyond the Founders* coeditor Andrew Robertson, Krista Ferrante, and others, Lampi has also been trying to correct the cultural myths he believes have emerged about the politics of the founding era in the absence of real electoral data. To honor Phil Lampi's work, further his larger project,

and also take advantage of *Common-place*'s online format, the [Publick Occurrences 2.0](#) blog will run an open-ended series entitled "[Myths of the Lost Atlantis](#)". Beginning when this special issue is posted, the series will continue—with postings every few days—through late October at least. Joining me on the blog will be distinguished guests including Donald Ratcliffe, Rosemarie Zagari, Matthew Mason, and Andrew Shankman, plus Robertson and Lampi themselves. Fellow *Common-place* readers and historians are urged to join in by commenting on the blog or sending their own contributions to me at PasleyJ@missouri.edu.

Finally, as *Common-place* moves toward an upgrade of the site's interactive features in 2009, each article in the special politics issue will have a dedicated comments page on the blog, accessible through a link at the bottom of its page. I will be moderating these comments and trying to facilitate dialogue between authors and readers if humanly and technically possible. Screen names are allowed and all non-offensive, reasonably on-topic comments will be posted. Let the reactions and corrections begin!

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