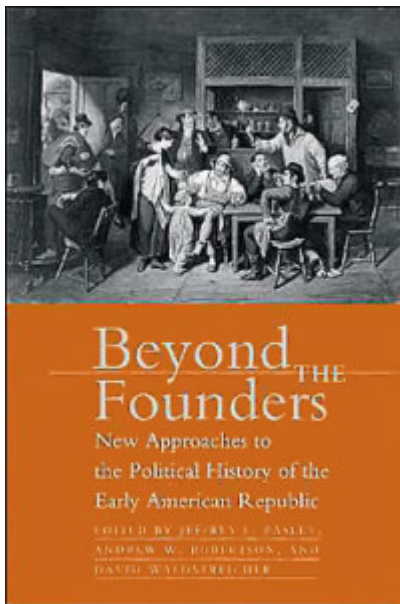


Looking for Politics in All the Right Places



In 1802, Baptists from a small community in Massachusetts delivered Thomas Jefferson a “mammoth cheese,” four feet across, eighteen inches tall, and weighing twelve hundred pounds, to demonstrate their support. In the same period, thousands of Americans identified with political parties via an expanding partisan press and such local events as parades and banquets. African Americans and women, while formally excluded from the political realm, made their interests known by the clothes they wore, by forming associations, by participating in public events, and by publishing their opinions in newspapers and pamphlets. In the 1830s, farmers dressed up as Indians to challenge the hegemony of their New York landlords. By conversing, joining, dressing up, and publishing, Americans of all types participated in politics. All these activities, some highly memorable and many more ephemeral, constituted political life in the early republic.



Beyond the Founders: New Approaches to the Political History of the Early American Republic

Beyond the Founders is a tour de force on behalf of a specific historiographical claim: the politics of the early American republic was shaped by the activities and ideas of both elite and ordinary persons from all backgrounds, often through processes of contestation and accommodation. There is a difference, the authors make clear, between saying that politics is everywhere and that everything is politics. They draw a line between the contemporary claim that “the personal is the political” in order to focus on

those activities that were intended to affect how Americans influenced and made political decisions. In the early republic, the sites of political activity were diverse and, perhaps more than one would expect, egalitarian. These authors argue for the centrality of politics broadly defined to understanding the postrevolutionary and early national eras.

Judging from the essays in this collection, the state of early American political history is strong. Political historians have lamented the death of political history since the 1960s and 1970s onslaught of social and cultural historians. In a 1999 article, Joel H. Silbey blamed social and cultural history for marginalizing political history. Joseph Ellis, in *Founding Brothers* (New York, 2000), posed a stark choice between social history without politics or politics without social history. It may come as a surprise, then, that the vitality of political history has been made possible thanks in large part to methodological and normative questions asked by social and cultural historians. *Beyond the Founders* disproves Ellis's contention that social-cultural history and political history are opposed to each other. Instead, the authors argue for an approach that draws on the strengths of both. They expand our definition of the political into topics that had once been the preserve of social and cultural historians, including public events and festivals, material culture, private spaces, and marginalized groups such as laborers, women, and African Americans.

The authors seek not only to reintegrate social and cultural history to political history but also to move beyond the Founders. They are responding to a recent wave of books focusing exclusively on the role of the Founding Fathers in shaping early American politics. There are two reasons why many historians are upset about what has been dubbed Founders Chic. The first reason is the simple fact that it refocuses attention on elite politicians and largely ignores two generations of work that aims not only to debunk the status of the Founders—as by exposing their complicity with slavery—but also to show that the world of ordinary people is both ethically and historically equally worthy of study. A less discussed point, but one equally important, is that some of the new books on the Founders exploit the theoretical apparatus of social and cultural historians. As David Waldstreicher argues in a 2002 review essay in *Radical History Review*, “the ‘ethno-historical’ or cultural perspective, which once signaled a desire to understand what historical changes meant to the ordinary people who lived through them, or to probe the changing modes of popular politics, is instead made to relegitimate the validity of the Washington beltway vision of how politics work.” The issue here is not one of historical merit but whether tools intended to give voice to the voiceless should be used on elites whose immense paper trails allow them to speak.

Beyond the Founders is divided into four sections. Each section moves beyond the Founders in a different way. In the first section, “Democracy and Other Practices,” Jeffrey L. Pasley, Andrew W. Robertson, and David Waldstreicher urge historians to look beyond political parties in order to connect popular activities with high politics. In the second section, “Gender, Race, and Other

Identities,” Rosemarie Zagarri, Nancy Isenberg, Albrecht Koschnik, and Richard Newman explore how politics shaped identity and vice versa. Koschnik, for example, examines the private realm of voluntary associations to explore how supposedly private activities in fact constitute public—and partisan—identity. In the third section, “Norms and Forms,” John L. Brooke, Saul Cornell, and Seth Cotlar discuss how ideological contests shaped constitutional and political development. In the final section, “Interests, Spaces, and Other Structures,” Andrew R. L. Cayton, Richard R. John, and Reeve Hutson seek out new frontiers. Cayton literally looks to the frontier in his examination of Texas annexation by integrating the activities and perspectives of Mexico and the Cherokee Nation. John focuses on how public opinion relates to institutional development. Hutson suggests that we must examine how ordinary people appropriated the new forms of partisan politics in combination with their own inherited popular traditions. The final section demonstrates that moving beyond the Founders is not just a vertical move but one that can be quite imaginative. In his concluding essay, William G. Shade evaluates the authors’ claims honestly and with some skepticism.

Reviewing essay collections is always a challenge since it is impossible to discuss every work. This was particularly difficult with this collection because each essay is engaging and moves the book’s argument forward. John L. Brooke’s essay deserves special mention, however, because he provides a theoretical framework to make sense of the collection’s larger argument. Brooke argues that, despite all the disagreements and debates between old and new political historians, and between political and social-cultural historians, they are all “engaged in a remarkably similar project” (210). Brooke draws on Jürgen Habermas’s conception of the public sphere to uphold this bold assertion. Each historical camp, Brooke writes, is ultimately concerned with how consent is generated in a democracy. Each is interested in who shapes political decisions and the role of power in affecting outcomes. By bringing civil society and its public sphere into the picture, we can create a new political synthesis that includes formal political institutions as well as the activities of ordinary people out of doors. In civil society and the public sphere, myriad groups interact and seek to influence each other. At some point, however, these interactions must be boiled down to the actual doings of politicians in state houses. It is here where the new meets the old. While anybody can seek to persuade voters and leaders, actual policy decisions are made by politicians and judges in formal settings. Bringing this all together will be no easy task, but Brooke has provided an important framework for how it might be possible. He also reminds historians that we are engaged in a common enterprise and should be open to each other’s contributions.

One of the major critiques of the newest political history is that it so expands the realm of the political as to ignore the stuff of formal politics—elections, court decisions, legislative debates, public policies, and institutions. (In another recent effort to provide a research template for political historians, *The Democratic Experiment: New Directions in American Political History*, edited by Meg Jacobs, William Novak, and Julian Zelizer, the

authors combine a new institutional approach with social history's focus on ordinary people and cultural history's emphasis on ideology. The result is more attention to institutions and policies.) Although Brooke suggests that the realms of formal and informal politics are connected, most of the essays in this collection tell us little about how. An important exception is Cornell's examination of the right to bear arms. Cornell states that historians of constitutionalism must "unite the traditional top-down perspective of constitutional history with the bottom-up perspective of social and cultural history" (253). His essay demonstrates that different social groups had distinctive understandings of their right to bear arms. The only others to deal with specific policy or legal questions are John, on debates over government regulation of the postal service and the telegraph, and Cotlar, on the context and effect of the Alien and Sedition Acts. These essays, along with Brooke's theoretical framework, point toward a research agenda that will combine the broad approach of *Beyond the Founders* with the more traditional questions asked by students of political development and public policy.

Beyond the Founders offers an interpretation of early national politics premised on the interplay between formal and informal politics, elite and ordinary people, ideology and practice, and public and private spaces. The original purpose of social and cultural history was to undermine the metanarrative of the rise of political democracy. These essays, despite their focus on conflict and pluralism, return to the older story, a point made by Shade. Instead of being marginalized, it turns out that the subjects of social and cultural history exerted real influence over politics. Like *Founders Chic*, this new volume uses radical tools to tell a traditional story. The story told is more sophisticated and less Whiggish than its earlier iterations; nonetheless, in Pasley's words, early national political culture may have been "the most participatory and transformative that the United States has ever experienced" (46). Whereas revisionist historians once pointed to the ways in which the early national era was elitist and exclusive, the authors of this volume have used the same methodology to reclaim the early republic as a time when participatory democracy gave all Americans a role in politics.

Further Reading:

For a critique of the influence of social and cultural history on political history, one should read Joel H. Silbey's "The State and Practice of American Political History at the Millennium: The Nineteenth Century as Test Case," *Journal of Policy History* 11 (1999): 1-30. For other discussions about the future direction of American political history, see Meg Jacobs, William J. Novak, and Julian E. Zelizer, eds., *The Democratic Experiment: New Directions in American Political History* (Princeton, 2003), and the articles by Richard R. John, Joanne B. Freeman, and Julian E. Zelizer in the *Journal of Policy History* 16 (2004). The most successful application of social-cultural methods to elite politics is Joanne B. Freeman, *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the Early Republic* (New Haven, 2001). For David Waldstreicher's critique, see

"Founders Chic as Culture War," *Radical History Review* 84 (fall 2002). The most eloquent synthesis on the emergence of democracy in post-revolutionary America is Gordon S. Wood, *Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York, 1991). For a critique of the democratization thesis, see Glenn C. Altschuler and Stuart M. Blumin, *Rude Republic: Americans and Their Politics in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, 2000). A discussion of Altschuler and Blumin's argument can be found in a forum of the *Journal of American History* 84 (Dec. 1997).

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