

## The Legitimation and Maturing of American Political Parties

### I. The Second American Party System

In the decade of 1820s, a second American party system began to take shape. Like the Jeffersonian party system, this Jacksonian party system exhibits contesting political parties and a party-system of rotating parties. But it differs in three essential respects: 1. It adopted methods pioneered by the Jeffersonian party system, but the Jacksonians and their Whig party opponents also developed new methods of mobilizing voters and winning their loyalty. 2. The new system involved a new class, a new kind of politician. 3. And it achieved legitimacy. It won acceptance for itself as a good thing for the country, a positive force, a state of things with positive social value.

#### 1. new vote-getting methods of popular politics

the Jacksonian party system broke new ground beyond the methods pioneered by the first Jeffersonian party system.

1. the nominating convention - conventions had been used at the county level and the state level to choose candidates and galvanize supporters but not at the national level. Typically a Congressional caucus of party loyalists chose the nominee for president. In the 1830s the caucus was replaced by the national nominating convention : Anti-Masons; Democrats; Whigs.

2. patronage to faithful. The Jacksonians introduced and nationalized the spoils system. Famously identified by the adage "To the Victors Belong the Spoils." (Wm H. Marcy, a Jacksonian Democrat operative). The idea is that when a party wins office it has the right to replace incumbent office-holders with its own faithful supporters. Jefferson did a bit of this but the first highly visible example occurred when Jackson took over the presidency in 1829; he and his party swept into office holders and put their own partisans in office. (previously pioneered at the state level by Martin Van Buren's Albany Regency).

Besides office, other benefits accrued to the party faithful. ( cf. the colonial practice of treating the voters with ox roasts). and other goodies. But in the Jacksonian era rewards became more universalized. A highpoint

occurred in the “Hard Cider and Log Cabin” campaign of 1840. (hard cider to voters.) (see Whig Almanac 1841 - handout) . It not a long step from this sort of thing to the distribution of jobs, thanksgiving baskets, fuel, etc to immigrants and slum-dwellers as became the practice of urban machines that sprang up after the Civil War in the big cities. And monetary pay-offs for votes.

3. widespread use of cant rhetoric, symbols, mottos, songs, etc. One of the most notable is the ubiquitous use of “friends of the people” rhetoric. Democrat (and Whig) political candidates obsessively professed themselves eager to advance democracy and fight privilege. Again there is precedent in the Jeffersonian era, but “friends of the people” rhetoric reaches a new height in this period. Jackson: “the man of the people” ( 1828 handbill, handout)

Other examples of popular slogans and symbols. The Whig chant, “Tippecanoe and Tyler too.” Harrison is depicted as born in a log cabin; that makes him “a man of the people.” Torch-carrying parades and other stunts. Negative Image representations: King Andrew. visually depicted in an ermine robe with a crown and stamping on the constitution. ( handout)

5. open-air campaigning. This too was pushed to new lengths. Open air speech -making surfaced in the Jeffersonian era - remember Irving’s Rip Van Winkle. But it wasn’t as extensive as it became in the Jacksonian era. The out-of-door nature of popular politics is depicted in George Caleb Bingham’s painting “The Election Verdict.” (see handout). The first presidential candidate to campaign openly and aggressively was William Henry Harrison in 1836. This was a bold move: you weren’t supposed to be too eager for office: It took time to universalize the practice of active campaigning by a presidential candidate. By 1860 Stephen Douglas was stumping much of the country. On the other hand, we know that in the 1860 election Lincoln remained in Springfield and didn’t campaign; as late as 1896 William McKinley’s conducted his campaign from the “Front Porch” while William Jennings Bryan went electioneering. (Lincoln Douglass debates )

## **2. Democratizing Party Leadership**

The Democrats and Whigs exhibited a leadership that was more “democratic,” in the sense of springing from humble or middle class

origins. Federalist and the Republican party chieftains had been “gentlemen politicians, ” patrician politicians.” A better word to use here is gentry: the Jeffersons, the Madisons, the Monroes; the Washingtons; the Hamiltons; the Adams’s nearly all of them, born to privilege, or moved easily among the privileged; and they were men of talent and social standing. “They thought of themselves as special men of ”talent and virtue.” But the Jacksonian Democrats and later the Whigs had a large proportion of self-made men who had worked up into property ownership as a small town professionals , country lawyers , storekeepers, land investors and speculators.

There were still gentlemen and large property holders in politics: John C. Calhoun. William Henry Harrison (“log cabin Harrison) of the Harrisons of Virginia. But think of Abraham Lincoln and his humble origins; and Martin Van Buren, son of a country tavern keeper; and Andrew Jackson also from a real log cabin in upcountry South Carolina.

This is an important point because these self-made men were comfortable with the rough and tumble popular politics of an increasingly democratic political environment - much more so than were the “gentlemen politicians of the pre-War of 1812 era.” Early Republican America was substantially although not altogether a ” world of deference” in which men of “talent and virtue” stood for office, they did not run for office. No self-respecting gentleman actively mingled with the lower orders or actively solicited votes. Rather, he won his votes by demonstrated achievement, by talent, and by property ownership (a demonstrated both a stake in society and achievement). He was therefore better fitted for public office than humbler men from the common sort. So ordinary men were expected to defer to their betters; a the gentlemen expected such “deference” as almost a birthright. But the habit of deference in Jeffersonian America was fast eroding and by Jackson’s time it was in full retreat. Many forces were assailing “deference” - not the least of them being the emergent combat of the Jeffersonian and Federalist parties which activated, energized, and empowered the common man.

These “popular politicians” of the Jacksonian era are different from most of the Jeffersonian politicians for a second reason: because they come from a new post-Revolution generation. For the most part, they were born after the Revolution and came of age after the Revolution. As such they

had witnessed the battles of the First American parties - which had not caused the horrible evils predicted of it. They (Hofstadter is our authority on this) “were . . . less thoroughly imbued with eighteenth-century anti-party doctrines and, and hence more capable of finding clues to a novel political outlook in the cumulative experience of quarter century of political life under the Constitution.” Hofstadter p. 214. The point is, this new generation felt comfortable with the realities of party competition; with the idea of a permanent party opposition ; with the parties changing places; and with the demotic arts of popular politics.

(They saw “the merits of the party organization as a political principle, and of two-party competition as an asset to the public interest. “ Hofstadter, p. 212.)

### **3.The Legitimation of Party**

It was during the development and maturation of the Democratic and Whig parties that party and party competition became almost fully legitimated. Now we see major political figures holding up parties and party competition as a good thing - as a force for good , as a positive force, as having positive value in their own right.

Historians of early parties think that one of the first - maybe the first - to articulate and advocate the functional merits political parties was Martin Van Buren.

Van Buren did not write a coherent theoretical exposition in defense of parties but he left snippets and ideas scattered in his autobiography and various other sources. They add up to a pretty coherent and positive case for political parties .

1. political parties and party competition are inevitable in a free society,
2. properly harnessed, [party and party spirit] are fundamentally a good thing for the public interest.” p. 224.
3. political parties should be built and conducted on broad principles of national good but not on personal greed for office or around great men or particular personalities.
4. loyalty and fidelity to the party are highly important: party members should accept party decisions and get behind

He also expressed some forward-looking thoughts about the functional merits of political parties and the party system. Hypothetically, how might Van Buren have made the case for parties as having good effects?

3. Can we imagine how a positive case for parties could be made? Can we identify what might be termed “the functional merits of the two-party system,” to use Hofstadter’s phrase.

1. watchdog function
2. an alternative to revolution function - offers the practical hope of change through peaceful elections ; as such it actually contains violent action
3. civic participation function - draws people into the political process and gives them a stake in the system. Serves to recruit talent into politics.
4. helps make a government of separate branches work - bridges gap between senate, house, and executive
5. consensus-forcing institution: to win, the party needs to accommodate a pluralism of interests and opinions and this forces the party to mediate and temper extremes. In short, promotes moderation.
6. civic education and entertainment function- through newspapers, rallies, and parades, party serves as an agent of civic education, amusement, and entertainment. In the 129th century, party activity was the only game in town.

Van Buren’s take:

7. (Parties and party competition are good because they engage people in politics and give them a vested interest in supporting the government’s authority.
2. Parties and party competition are good because they serve a watchdog function. The “out” party keeps a vigilant eye on the actions and policies of the ‘in’ party and keeps it from improper action.
3. Parties and party competition on a national scale have a moderating effect . Call it a “consensus-forcing “ effect. To be effective (which means to win elections), a national party has to win support in all parts of the country. This means not alienating any particular , interest, region, or section by avoiding extremes. I

Not Van Buren but his political ally , Governor Enos Throop, in 1829: “Organized parties watch and scan each other’s doings, the public mind is instructed by ample discussion of public measures, and acts of violence are restrained by the convictions of the people, that the prevailing measures are the results of enlightened reason.” Hofstadt. p. 151

Other contemporaries can be identified as hailing political parties as a good thing for the U.S.

Francis Lieber, a S.C. political science professor at S.C. College penned a two volume Manuel of Political Ethics (1839) which made a strong case for parties.

Jabez Hammond of New York, a lawyer and politician in New York penned a History of Political Parties in the State of New York (1843).

There were others as well: Hofstadter discusses them; they include Charles Sumner and William H. Seward.

Van Buren actually invoked the moderating and consensus-forcing function of party when he first proposed organizing the Democratic party. (The year was 1826 ; - still in the party-free environment of the Era of Good Feelings.) Van Buren writes that year to Thomas Ritchie, newspaper editor and one of the chiefs of the so-called Richmond Virginia “Junto” - a Virginia states-rights political action group left over from the now defunct Jeffersonian Republican party. Van Buren proposes to Ritchie that they collaborate in organizing a new national party, with a southern and northern base, and found it on the constitutional principle of “strict construction” of the Constitution (translate - i.e. a narrow interpretation of federal power which, among other things, kept the federal government powerless to meddle with slavery ). Joining hands around the principle of strict construction, northern and southern members of the new party would have to work cooperatively and collegially in order to get their party into power; this meant avoiding divisive and explosive issues such as slavery. With a strict constructionist party in the drivers seat, the federal government would be immunized against doing anything to end slavery and the federal union would be better protected against the possibility of southern secession to protect slavery against the federal government’s trying to end slavery. ( Van Buren understood how explosive and divisive the slavery issue could be and he wanted to keep issue securely bottled up.); this was the purpose of his proposal for a national party with southern and northern wings based on strict construction.

## **II. The Golden Age of Party**

Political Parties and Party Competition hit their stride in the mid and late nineteenth century. The Jacksonian Democrats began the process; they not only formed the first organization but were the first to embrace party organization and competition as a good thing. The Whig party was slower on both counts. The Whigs formed during the 1830s in reaction to the Jacksonians and were mainly propelled by President Jackson’s expansive

over-reaches (“executive usurpation”); (Whig referred to the British Whigs who had opposed an expansive royal prerogative. ) Whig party leaders always claimed that party organization and electioneering had been forced upon them: As Illinois Whig Abraham Lincoln put it: “They set us an example of organization , and we, in self-defense, are driven to it.” Howe, What Hath God Wrought.p. 584. Nevertheless, by the 1840s the Whigs were fully in the fray - as the Tippecanoe and Tyler hard Cider and Log Cabin campaign of 1840 indicates.

The basic forms and methods of the Parties as developed by the Jeffersonian Republicans and Jacksonian Democrats and their rivals remain in place right down to 1900. Here are some other aspects to note:

1. the parties were both and at once centralized and decentralized. They had recognized national leadership -usually but not invariably headed by the incumbent president or the most recent presidential candidate plus a stable of recognized talented elder statesman. They had state party organizations as well. Party agendas were usually set by the party leaders , not by rank-and-file popular forces. Again, their driving force were more from the top down, not from the bottom up.
2. they were largely coalitional rather than solid blocs of homogeneous citizens. . Their leaders came from different regions and sections and their constituencies were a hodgepodge by classes, economic interests , and ethnicities. Nevertheless, in one respect they were homogeneous. Except for a brief interval during Reconstruction, they were basically lily white parties - composed of white adult males. Women didn’t get the vote until 1919 (19th amendment). Black males were supposed to get the vote in 1867 (15th amendment), But the force of the federal government was required in federal legislation and executive enforcement (Voting Rights Act, 1965) to make it a reality.
3. the parties’ “decisive role” (Keller) in American politics generated a whole new idiom of party-related words and phrases in the language. Here’s what Morton Keller writes: Three Regimes, p.74. “English parliamentary candidates stood for office. American candidates ran for office- and bluffed, bolted, backed and filled, stumped for votes, dodged the issue, took a walk. Their campaigns were tempestuous affairs, replete

with booms, landslides, avalanches, prairie fires, tidal waves, stampedes and clean sweeps. Their political world was filled with the material imagery of agrarian [and rural] life. They barnstormed on platforms composed of planks; they were dyed -in- the- wool party men. Candidates were dark horses when they didn't have the inside track as a front-runner. They had a running mate or could serve as stalking horse for a favorite son. Once in office they enacted pork barrel legislation, as often as not the product of log rolling. They were lame ducks when they lost an re-election. Fence mending was a political as well as an agricultural duty. A bellwether was both a bell-toting lead sheep or a flock and a representative voting district. “

#### 4. The Jacksonian party system spawned some interesting political archetypes :

-the placatory professional politician;

Our friend Van Buren is considered as the archetype of the “placatory professional politician.” Born to a country tavern keeper, Van Buren apprenticed in a law firm and went into politics in New York. He has been described as “an amiable county courthouse lawyer translated into politics.” He learned to rub elbows with plain farmers and mechanics in the county courthouses and taverns of upstate New York along the Hudson. Hofstadter labels him a “placatory professional politician ” -placatory because he schmoozes among the common people; professional because he makes politics his life's work and means of support . Van Buren went on to become one of Andrew Jackson's trusted advisors , his Vice President, and then U.S. president in his own right.

This is supposed to be the golden age of democracy. But as Daniel Walker shows, although Van Buren professed to champion the cause of the common man, he wasn't very interested in democracy. By chance, he happened to be in England at the time of passage of the great Reform Act of 1832 which extended the franchise to middle class males. He displayed absolutely no interest in or enthusiasm for its passage.

Van Buren can also be identified as the prototype of the machine boss. Using office patronage as his tool he built an efficient organization(the Albany New York Regency) of loyal advocates and supporters by awarding to the faithful circuit court judgeships, justiceships of the peace and other local offices. In addition, “Van Buren was the first state boss to turn



national party fixer. That he should be Jackson's success as president announces as much as did Jackson's presidency, that a new political regime had come into being. " Keller, 76.

Van Buren's Whig counterpart was Thurlow Weed, also a New Yorker. Also from humble origins, Weed entered politics not via the local tavern but via journalism. He started as a printer's apprentice and became editor of the Albany Evening Journal. "A master of the style and technique of the new mass politics, Weed built and ruled New York's Whig party in the 1830s and 1840s much as Van Buren did the Democrats in the 1820s. Keller. 76.

#### 5. a rise in voter turn-out, in voter participation

Here is another by-product of this Second American party system. Studies of voter turn-out show a steady increase in the number of enfranchised eligible voters in step with the build-up and extension of competing party organizations. Between 1776 and 1830 the states broadened the suffrage from the ownership of property to straightforward white manhood suffrage. At the same time, as party organization waxed and waned, so did voter turnout. During the heyday of the battle between the Republican and Federalist parties voter turn-out increased to as high as 40-45 %. During the era of Good Feelings it slumped back to 15-20%. In the Jacksonian-National Republican election of 1828 it rose to 57% ; held steady in 1832 election of 1832 at 35%, rose slightly in 1836 to 58% and then soared in 1840 to 78%.

-Thenceforth voter turnout continued at a very high level. After the Civil War party combat (enhanced by organized get-out-the vote efforts by the urban machines) produced record-breaking turnouts. The number of eligible voters who actually voted between 1876-97 averaged 78.5% which is as high as in the record-setting 1840 election. In the 1896 election - where "free silver" was hot issue - the vote in the midwest topped 95% of the eligible voters voting.