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Rethinking 1828: the Emergence of Competing Democracies in the United States

With few exceptions, historians of the antebellum United States depict “democratization” as a unitary process. Jacksonian democracy, they agree, involved the triumph of a single way of doing politics—partisan democracy—over the champions of “deferential” and “anti-partisan” politics. The election of 1828 looms large in this interpretation. Historians agree that the election that ushered Andrew Jackson into the presidency created a new kind of politics, marked by fierce partisanship and unprecedented popular participation.

This paper challenges this interpretation. It argues that 1828 witnessed not the emergence of a unitary kind of democracy, but the bitterly contested victory of one vision and practice of democracy (and not a new one) over several others, as well as the commencement of an ongoing conflict over how to practice democracy.

The era leading up to 1828, the misnamed “Era of Good Feelings” (1815-1828), witnessed fierce battles over how politics ought to be conducted. With the collapse of the Federalist party and the end of the U.S.’s first era of partisan conflict, established politicians abandoned the popular mobilization that had emerged during the earlier era, embracing instead an insider politics founded on clientage, personal loyalty, and the exchange of favors. Political novices and outsider politicians rejected this insider politics. In a series of mobilizations, they denounced the genteel pretensions and imperviousness to public opinion of political leaders. They carved out an expansive role for ordinary people in public life and articulated radical ideas about constituents’ relationship to government officials. At the same time, an emerging class of middling-born, upwardly mobile lawyer-politicians sought to remake politics as well. Some allied themselves with popular insurgencies, seeking to turn them to their own and their political factions’ advantages. Others sought to revive the partisan methods inherited from Jeffersonian activists, which they combined with a new organizational ethos and a new political morality drawn from the professional culture of the law.

Andrew Jackson’s 1828 presidential campaign successfully brought together several of these modes of conducting politics. In the process, they began to lay the groundwork for a semi-stable political order. The new men of politics first achieved national power in that campaign, making the partisan, democratic practices and ideals pioneered by Jeffersonian activists the national norm. At the same time, the Jacksonians appealed explicitly to the discontents and ideals voiced by popular political insurgencies during the Era of Good Feelings. But they sought to tame radical demands for popular sovereignty, channeling them into a movement to elect “the people’s choice.”

The Jacksonians neither satisfied nor silenced demands for more expansive popular rule, however. 1828 witnessed the rise not only of Jacksonian democracy, but of other democratic movements as well: plebeian popular revolts like the Workingmen’s parties and the Anti-Masonic party; evangelical reform; a newly expansive politics among African Americans and white women in the North. Each of these movements challenged the emerging practices of the Jacksonians and their mainstream opponents and offered alternative blueprints for democracy. The election of 1828 did not usher in a single, new form of democracy. The partisan democracy it is known for was actually a generation old. It did, however, give rise to a pattern of contested democracy that continues to this day, in which insurgent movements sought to discredit and displace the “democracy” practiced by established partisan organizations.

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