Abstract: Andrew ROBERTSON

*Democracy: America’s Other “Peculiar Institution”*

Since Alexis de Tocqueville published his two-volume *De la démocratie en Amérique*, Americans’ idea of their democracy has often seemed inextricably bound up with the notion of American ‘exceptionalism.’ The scholarship of the past twenty years, however, especially among colonial historians, has called this into question. Rather than describing American democracy as “exceptional,” a word that better describes these twists and turns in the history of American democracy is “peculiar”: that term better captures the unusual and puzzling features of popular government in America then and now. The “peculiarity” of American democracy is precisely what warmed Tocqueville to this subject, and the word occurs frequently in his two volumes (<particulier> which in some contexts of *démocratie* can be translated as “particular,” “special” “idiosyncratic” or “peculiar”). I have argued that American democracy in the early nineteenth century is America’s other “peculiar institution,” and this connotative link to slavery points to the increasing salience of race in defining the limits of inclusion.

The elections after 1800 marked the first successful national mobilization effort by both Republican and Federalist parties. Issues drove elections in this era, particularly international issues. For instance, foreign policy questions obsessed elites and the broader public from the Edmond Genet Affair to the end of the War of 1812. Other critical issues also drove public debate and mass participation: the relationship of Church and State was one visible issue. In the early nineteenth century three factors came together: 1) the critical salience of economic issues; 2) party competition extending to a mass base; and 3) persistent rivalries of complementary national press networks, now extended to the local level. In the years after 1800 competition over critical issues, tied to longstanding local rivalries and international trans-Atlantic preferences, allowed the Federalist and Republican parties to construct coherent identities.

In the first decades of the nineteenth century, Americans fiercely debated the boundaries of a democratic universe. As American democracy expanded on one axis eliminating property requirements for all adult white males, it contracted on another axis by restricting or denying African American men voting rights and eliminating the suffrage for women heads of household in New Jersey. After 1808 most states admitted to the Union adopted racial exclusions for voting. Examining New York and New Jersey 1800-1828 shows how the accepted definition of American democracy became increasingly bounded by race. In the decade before the Civil War, only five of the six New England states still permitted African American men to vote on the same basis as their white fellow citizens.

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