
Reviewed by Michelle Orihel

In Practicing Democracy, Douglas Bradburn observes: “American historians have overwhelmingly been Whig historians” (26). The phrase “Whig history” originated in Herbert Butterfield’s The Whig Interpretation of History, published in 1931. Whig historians used the past, Butterfield argued, to explain and sanction the triumph of liberal democracy in nineteenth-century Britain. By orienting their studies toward that achievement, historians failed to understand the past on its own terms. In the United States, Whig history manifests itself in the democratization model of development. This model presents the nation as democratizing steadily over time, with democracy encompassing free elections, an expanding electorate, and a two-party system. Andrew Robertson contends that historians of nineteenth-century American politics have especially adopted a Whig perspective (99). Many historians search for the roots of democracy in the early republic, and trace its rise from Thomas Jefferson to Andrew Jackson or Abraham Lincoln. The ten essays in this compelling new volume edited by Daniel Peart and Adam I. P. Smith challenge that Whig trajectory.

While Whig histories chart a linear path to democracy, the essays in Practicing Democracy present case studies of uneven development, improvisation, and instability. John L. Brooke conceptualizes historical time as “lumpy and punctuated” rather than “smooth and continuous”
Similarly, Robertson depicts a “tortuous trajectory” of development, one in which “democratic ideology and practices ebbed and flowed” (99). Political participation also varied by ethnicity, sex, race, and class. Irish and German immigrants in New York City, Tyler Anbinder finds, remained largely disengaged from controversies like the Kansas–Nebraska Act that polarized Americans in the 1850s. Instead, immigrants focused on local issues such as schooling that affected them directly. Reeve Huston further stresses “the geographic and temporal unevenness” of democratic practices (55). Illustrating these variations, Daniel Peart demonstrates that during the Era of Good Feelings voter turnout was much higher in Illinois, a frontier state that lacked organized parties, than in Massachusetts, a state where partisanship persisted. This conclusion challenges the standard interpretation of that era as one of political apathy in which partisanship subsided. The era, Peart claims, should be called “the Era of Experimentation,” a label that applies to early republic politics in general (138). Graham A. Peck also highlights this political improvisation. A rapid turnover in officeholding in Illinois, he argues, gave voters numerous opportunities to elect new representatives. In constant dialogue with voters, politicians changed positions on issues to “reflect voters’ interests and judgments” (145). He concludes that the historical category “Second Party System” fails to convey that dynamism.

Yet, many historians remain attached to the “Party System” concept, arguing that competitive political parties fueled democratization. Americans inherited this obsession with a two-party system, Bradburn argues, from early modern England: “The men who built the first party politics in the United States were ideological Whigs whose histories of England were filled with sharp dialectical fights between advocates for prerogative power and martyrs for liberty,” from the Parliamentarians and Royalists of the Civil War to the Whigs and Tories thereafter (40). This legacy, Bradburn maintains, shapes “the way too many American historians still write the history of their country” (41). Whig historians begin their inquiries with the two-party system, and then look backward to explain its origins and development. In his study of the movement to consolidate the city and suburbs of Philadelphia in 1851, Andrew Heath stresses that looking backward can be deceptive. Previous historians have seen consolidation as foreshadowing the urban machine politics of the late nineteenth century, but Heath argues that if one “look[s] forward from
... 1851, ... the rise of boss rule does not seem preordained” (224). Instead, the consolidation movement reflected the reform and anti-party sentiments of elite Philadelphians in the 1850s, a group more interested in resurrecting Federalist notions of deference than in anticipating the political future.

Several other essays in *Practicing Democracy* look beyond political parties for evidence of democratization. “The democratization process” may have taken place “in civil society rather than in traditional politics,” Johann N. Neem contends (268). He hypothesizes that citizens gained the “capability” to influence politics more by participating in the meetings and associations of civil society than by engaging in formal politics. In his study of post-revolutionary Pennsylvania politics, Kenneth Owen argues that political legitimacy “depended on being able to demonstrate popular support from representative institutions,” with citizens turning to extra-governmental organizations to influence political outcomes (174). John L. Brooke further examines how the extra-legal antislavery petitioning campaigns and the efforts to rescue fugitive slaves in the North, along with the publication of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and the songs of Stephen Foster, enabled the creation of the Republican Party.

In exploring the impact of extra-legal organizations and cultural forces on politics, *Practicing Democracy* builds on works by Albrecht Koschnik, Johann N. Neem, Catherine O’Donnell, Kyle G. Volk, and others, which have examined the voluntary associations, literary culture, and reform movements of the new republic. It should be read in conjunction with Sean Wilentz’s *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York, 2005), which focuses on the formal politics of parties and leaders. The two works would pair quite nicely in an advanced undergraduate or graduate seminar. Though Wilentz charts an upward trajectory toward democracy, a tendency that this volume critiques, he remains sensitive to the contingencies of the historical process. *Practicing Democracy* adds to that master narrative by illustrating the variations and ruptures that characterized American politics. The volume also highlights the need for more research on extralegal politics and, eventually, for a historian to write a narrative synthesis of the development of those organizations and changing attitudes toward them from the Revolution to the Civil War. This would enable historians to understand better the relationship between formal and informal politics in the
new republic, when citizens were negotiating the terms of their relationships to one another and to their government. The essays in *Practicing Democracy* provide a good starting point for reflecting on that question.

Michelle Orihel is an assistant professor of history at Southern Utah University. She is currently researching the Democratic-Republican societies of the trans-Appalachian West.


Reviewed by Jonathan M. Chu

Shays’s Rebellion in current scholarship is one example of the widespread endemic pattern of economic distress, protest, and disorder throughout the new nation that precipitated the convening of the Constitutional Convention. Building upon this interpretation in *Shays’s Rebellion: Authority and Distress in Post-Revolutionary America,* Sean Condon tells a familiar story. Farmers in western and central Massachusetts, removed from commercial centers, deeply indebted, abused by private creditors, and oppressed by heavy taxes, reacted predictably by modeling their behavior upon traditions of revolutionary popular protest. More specifically, they stopped sheriffs from seizing assets for the non-payment of private debts and taxes, organized mass protests to regulate (the term of art for justifying extralegal action) self-interested public officials, petitioned for debt relief, and, ultimately, stopped civil courts from meeting. Unable to obtain redress of its grievances, the regulation spontaneously escalated into armed militias and the insurrection that came to be identified with Daniel Shays.

For Condon, though, Shays’s Rebellion was also a problem of authority: how to govern the regulators and regulate the government when jurisdictional lines and political processes remained ambiguous or in flux. While Samuel Ely’s 1782 protest was resolved with a petition emanating out of the Hampshire County Convention attended by Samuel Adams and two other state legislators, later protests were met with heightened opposition. Confronted with policies imposing impossible
Copyright of Journal of the Early Republic is the property of University of Pennsylvania Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.