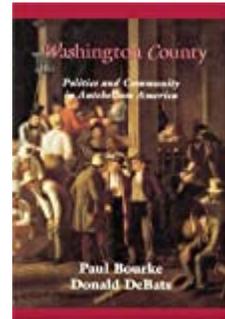


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Paul Bourke, Donald Debats. *Washington County: Politics and Community in Antebellum America.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995. xvii + 407 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-4950-3; \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8018-5946-5.



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In this detailed, suggestive, and sometimes problematic study, Paul Bourke and Donald DeBats examine the life of Washington County, Oregon, and the lives—private and public—of the migrants who settled there. The authors contend that in this remote corner of the Pacific Northwest the cultures of an older America were reproduced and, more to the point, “within such narrow spatial confines it seemed as if the conflict that would divide the whole nation a decade later were being acted out in small rehearsals” (p. 3). Bourke and DeBats are particularly intent on adding a new dimension to our understanding of antebellum politics. Oregon’s voting laws provide them with a particularly rich source of material for their efforts. The territory voted *viva voce* (by voice). As a result, poll books, recording each individual’s vote in local and territorial elections, supply detailed information on partisan allegiance and personal voting habits throughout the 1850s. Combining this resource with extensive social, cultural, and economic data, Bourke and DeBats hope at the very least to “refine the picture of the traditional electorate derived from aggregate returns” (p. 15). At the very most, they wish to challenge long-held assumptions about political socialization and the shaping of partisan allegiances.

The first third of the study is concerned with the peoples, occupations, government, and cultures of Washing-

ton County. Not surprisingly, Native Americans, trappers, metis, and missionaries were first into the area. White incursions from the East were infrequent and scattered. Glowing reports of the fertile lands of the Willamette Valley attracted thousands from New England and the Upper South. Pushed into the West by exhausted lands in the East and pulled by the lure of available land (greatly enhanced by the Donation Land Claim Law of 1850), migrants moved to Oregon in ever-increasing numbers. In 1844, nearly 1,500 traveled the Overland Trail to the territory; ten years later, 6,000 made the trip.

Washington County was predominantly rural and land owning was widespread. Distribution of wealth, however, was unequal and closely resembled patterns of older settlements in the East. Governance in the county was minimal, local in focus, and dominated disproportionately by a minority of nonagricultural professionals, primarily doctors and lawyers. Although status rather than experience characterized political leadership (“visible partisans”), politics in the country were nevertheless inclusive, fundamentally open, and shaped by connections that were personal and communal.

Bourke and DeBats are especially interested in discovering how Washington County residents developed their political identities and made political choices. They

principally wish “to understand what kind of experience it was to be a Democrat or a Know-Nothing or a Republican” (p. 17). Although they are interested up to a point in the social profiles of the individual voter, Bourke and DeBats are far more concerned with voters as a community. Discounting the significance of political leaders, partisan appeals, and, so it seems to me, the interplay of ideological beliefs and public behavior, the authors conclude that private and highly personal considerations were more determinant of voting behavior. In particular, communities—defined variously by common interests, values, kinship, and settlement patterns—existing within and across formal civil divisions forged loyalties to the Democratic and Republican parties and between leaders and the electorate.

New Englanders who settled in Washington County tended to vote for the American Party then Republican. Controlling much of the county’s public culture, they championed education, embraced and promoted the virtues of Protestantism, and transplanted Northeastern nativism in the Pacific Northwest. They feared Catholics (who were hardly a presence in the county), the foreign born, and Native Americans. By the mid-1850s, they had gone beyond their eastern brethren by adding backwoodsmen and poor white trash (read: southerners) to the list of cultural enemies. They moved easily and naturally into the Republican Party in the mid-1850s. Their political ties bound them to reform movements (if, indeed, nativism be a reform movement) rooted in eastern urban America. Within the country itself, they formed networks of alliances derived from common memberships in institutions such as the Congregational Church and educational academies.

The contours of the Democracy were different. Older, more experienced in politics, and somewhat more wealthy in terms of land and personal property, party leaders emphasized personal liberty which, the authors claim, “rested in part on a tradition of southern enlightenment” (p. 156). They represented a constituency, drawn largely but not exclusively from the Upper South, that feared the encroachments of urban and market development on their individual freedoms and family farms. In contrast to Republicans who were connected through commonly valued and supported institutions, family and space linked Democrats. Kinship and settlement patterns shaped as well as defined their political allegiance. Backward looking and lacking the verve of Republicans, the county’s Democracy—as Bourke and DeBats have it—were driven by “a series of impulses that were highly localistic, more clannish than communal,

suspicious of novelty, and profoundly troubled by the fervent enthusiasms of reformers” (p. 158). Given the dynamism of its nativist, allegedly reform-minded, and upwardly mobile opponents, the Democracy was, like the woolly mammoth, doomed to extinction in Washington County.

The most ambitious, intriguing, and to my mind controversial element of their analysis of voting behavior is Bourke’s and DeBats’s effort to understand why the electorate chose to vote as it did. Most immediately, they want to explain how county politics were transformed from a competitive political arena to one characterized by one-party domination. Republican ascendancy, they conclude, did not issue from Democratic conversions to this new theology. Indeed, voting records show remarkable partisan stability. Rather, internal rifts in the party and repeated failure at the polls discouraged the Democratic rank and file. By the late 1850s, Democratic voters stayed away from the polls in droves. On the other hand, new voters entering the political arena opted first to support Know-Nothing candidates (in a county with very few Catholics and foreigners), then antislavery Republicans (in a county free of African Americans and slaves). Why they chose to do so is not altogether clear; but more on this later.

If, as the authors have it, Washington County was “a one-class or preclass environment with an overwhelmingly agricultural economic base, relatively few nonfarm occupations, and a narrow range of cultural and religious variations” (p. 216), what accounted for partisan divisions? Bourke’s and DeBats’s analysis of the relationship between voters’ socioeconomic and cultural attributes and their partisan behavior challenges and contradicts long-held beliefs of ethnocultural historians. Wealth and social attributes, they demonstrate, do not accurately distinguish partisans in Washington County. Differences in wealth, however, were related to politicization: more affluent residents with a clear stake in the county’s future tended to be party leaders and regular voters in both parties. Not surprisingly, therefore, “visible partisans” in both parties were drawn disproportionately from the small professional class in the county. Skilled artisans and professionals were solidly Republican, and laborers voted Democratic. Employees’ votes correlated significantly with employers’ voting records. Neither age, marital status, nor regional origin, however, were generally associated with party preference. Data on religion and voting preference is scant and the relationship between the two less than conclusive. Thus, general social characteristics did not correlate with partisanship in a mean-

ingful way and, taken one with another, wash out in the general electorate.

Having discounted the importance of partisan appeals and the significance of social characteristics, Bourke and DeBats conclude that neighborhoods, variously defined, shaped partisan differences. Social groups, they conclude, shared views on political choices. The more influential members of those groups, moreover, strongly influenced voting preference (note the correlation between employer and employee voting patterns). Furthermore, the influence of these visible partisans is enhanced as the space in which they operate is diminished. In Washington County, the maximum spatial limits would be five miles.

Bourke and DeBats conclude that a sequence of small neighborhoods existed in Washington County. Family, settlement patterns, educational institutions, or common interests and views on society could define these “small worlds.” Politics in Washington County were personal, private, and local. Politics, they conclude, “became an expression of their membership of a community, or their sharing of and joining in the values of that community” Although, Bourke and DeBats freely concede that this does not tell us why some residents were Democrats and others were not, they do conclude that “political action itself [was] becoming a source of communal reinforcement and definition” (p. 275).

There is much to admire in Bourke’s and DeBats’s sophisticated analysis of voting behavior, especially their deft handling of social and political history. Yet there is much to question. Neighborhood, for example, defined so elastically is both inventive and problematic. Like the much maligned concept of republicanism which has been made to serve many masters and explain all political action, the authors’ concepts of neighborhood is made to account for all political activity in Washington County. If the concept of neighborhood can mean anything, then one might plausibly conclude it explains nothing.

Bourke’s and DeBats’s understanding of the outcome of partisan combat in Washington County borders on the tautological. Washington County’s Democracy (though taking their argument on its own terms, it might just as well apply to the national party) “lacked, in the vital years of the 1850s, a dynamic aspect and appeared always to rest on old truths,” they argue. “The social values of Oregon’s (and Washington County’s) Democrats had little to offer to those who could see the need for new social arrangements that would take account of new sources of wealth or new social pressures” (pp. 158-59). The tri-

umph of the town over the village, of impersonal institutions over community, of change over tradition, and the dynamic over the static reflect a determinism predicated more on outcome rather than the contingent nature of political strife.

Although the authors draw on a vast and diverse secondary literature, their understanding of antebellum politics may be challenged. A closer reading of political histories of Jacksonian America and the South would support and give depth to certain of their conclusions while paradoxically challenging others. For example, their characterization of the Democratic and Republican parties comports nicely on one level with Larry Kohl’s interpretation of partisan identity in the Age of Jackson. The Democracy, Kohl argues, “appealed chiefly to those still living in the web of traditional social relationships.... Because their character structure was not well suited to modernity, modern institutions and modern human relations seemed constricting and degrading, rather than liberating and beneficial.” Whigs (later Republicans, one might add) were “inner directed men” who while appealing for social order and unity in fact attempted “to recognize and reconnect individuals on the basis of their own self interest.”[1] Yet Kohl proves that these identities did not, as Bourke and DeBats maintain, derive from regional origins but were rather characteristic of national partisan identification.

Recent and not so recent studies of antebellum slave-state politics also cast serious doubts on Bourke’s and DeBats’s views of the distinctively southern character of Washington County’s Democracy. For a monograph replete with nuance, subtlety, and carefully drawn conclusions, the view of southern politics seems one-dimensional, monolithic, and dated. Works of J. Mills Thornton, Lacy K. Ford, Jr., Marc Kruman, Steven Hahn, Jonathan Atkins, and Anthony Carey, to cite a few, paint a picture of southern politics that is variegated, contested, and far more dynamic than that asserted (and I use the term advisedly) by Bourke and DeBats.[2]

The strength of this book—its careful, detailed, and extended analysis of social characteristics, neighborhood, and partisanship—also constitute its greatest weakness. That we know how the visible and invisible electorate voted does not tell us why they voted in a certain way. To conclude that voting was an expression of community (broadly defined) does not tell us how and why certain issues, some of which—slavery and nativism, for example—far removed from the everyday lives of the electorate resonated with them. The appeals and ideology of the

parties are described briefly and the voting behavior of leaders and the rank and file are analyzed in detail. But the important interplay of belief and behavior—the nexus between the two—is asserted rather than proven, and ignored rather than understood. For historians who believe that political behavior can be quantified and that the human condition can be reduced to a predictive science, Bourke's and DeBats's analysis of partisanship will challenge, provoke, and enlighten. Others interested in the way in which fundamental axioms operate upon groups and political actors will discover that *Washington County* raises—and begs—more questions than it answers. For them, the book will appear less than the sum of its parts.

Notes

[1]. Lawrence Frederick Kohl, *The Politics of Individualism: Parties and the American Character in the Jacksonian Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 15, 16.

[2]. J. Mills Thornton III, *Politics and Power in a Slave*

Society: Alabama, 1800-1860 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978); Lacy K. Ford, Jr., *Origins of Southern Radicalism: The South Carolina Upcountry, 1800-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Marc W. Kruman, *Parties and Politics in North Carolina, 1836-1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983); Stephen Han, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeomen Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850-1890* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983); Jonathan M. Atkins, *Parties, Politics, and the Sectional Conflict in Tennessee, 1832-1861* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997); Anthony Gene Carey, *Parties, Slavery, and the Union in Antebellum Georgia* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997).

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