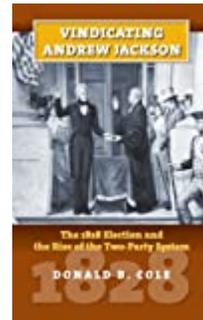


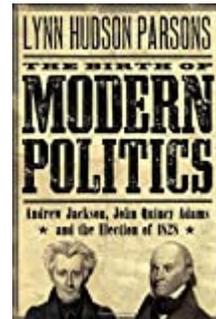
# H-Net Reviews

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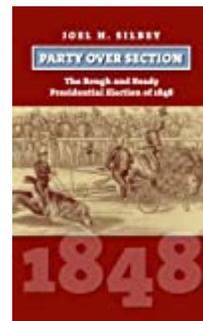
**Donald B. Cole.** *Vindicating Andrew Jackson: The 1828 Election and the Rise of the Two-Party System.* American Presidential Elections Series. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009. Illustrations. xiii + 254 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-1661-9.



**Lynn Hudson Parsons.** *The Birth of Modern Politics: Andrew Jackson, John Quincy Adams, and the Election of 1828.* Pivotal Moments in American History Series. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. Illustrations. xviii + 252 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-531287-4.



**Joel H. Silbey.** *Party over Section: The Rough and Ready Presidential Election of 1848.* American Presidential Elections Series. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009. xiv + 205 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-1640-4.



**Reviewed by** Douglas R. Egerton (LeMoyne College)

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**Commissioned by** Caleb McDaniel (Rice University)

**The Rise and Fall of Jacksonian Democracy**

Inauguration Day dawned clear but very cold, yet the bitter weather did little to dampen the enthusiasm of those Americans who poured into the nation's capital to witness "the great ceremony." Hotel rents tripled, but even then few rooms could be found. Many traveled from far away, but long before their candidate raised his hand to take the oath of office, they had pushed and shoved their way onto crowded Metro trains, all of them, to borrow the words of Daniel Webster, confident "that the country has been rescued from some dreadful danger" (Parson, p. xiii).

Inspired perhaps by the 2008 contest and the inauguration of President Barack Obama, scholars and readers have developed new interest in presidential elections. Two new monographs chronicle the election of 1828, and a third examines that of 1848. Lynn Hudson Parsons's volume is part of Oxford's Pivotal Moments in America series—which does not deal exclusively with elections—while Donald B. Cole's and Joel H. Silbey's books are among the ten volumes published or to be published in Kansas's American Presidential Elections series.[1] None of the three monographs engage simply in top-down elite politics, as all address the larger implications of popular participation and the emergence of an egalitarian political culture. More important still, all three volumes examine the impact that these contests held for all of those residing in the young Republic, especially Native Americans and slaves.

Cole actually mentions the current president in his book (noting that Andrew Jackson's "election and Barack Obama's have much in common" [p. xi]), and both he and Parsons close with an earlier, if equally sunny inauguration. Washington's streets, reported Margaret Bayard Smith, were "deep in slush—snow, mud, mire" (Parsons, p. xi). But here too the city was crowded with citizens who had come to celebrate, and so many arrived that the ceremony, the first open to the public, was held outside on the east front of the Capitol. At 252 and 254 pages, respectively, Parsons and Cole are similar in size and pagination. Both include numerous images, but Parsons leans toward handbills and political cartoons. Cole, as do other authors in the Kansas series, features two appendices containing Jackson's inaugural address and portions of his first annual message. Cole is also more inclined to discuss historiography in his text, while Parsons relegates most such debates to his endnotes. Interestingly, Cole's earlier books, and especially his admired *The Presidency of Andrew Jackson* (1993), have dealt with influential Democrats, while Parsons is the author of the best single volume biography of John Quincy Adams. Here,

however, each author strives for balance. Although Cole clearly admires the Old Hero, he is pained by many of the unfair charges hurled at Adams in 1828. As for Parsons, while it remains clear that he believes the country would have been better off under Adams, he depicts Adams as an inept politician, and like all specialists in the period, he finds it hard not to be fascinated by Jackson. "No one speaks of an 'Age of Adams,'" Parsons admits (p. 1).

Beyond that, these two senior, respected authors have crafted surprisingly dissimilar studies. Parsons, as his title suggests, regards 1828 as a turning point in American electioneering, the year that witnessed the "birth of modern politics." In Jackson's campaign, Parsons observes, can be found the elements familiar to those Americans who poured onto the Washington Mall in 2009. "Coordinated media, fund-raising, organized rallies, opinion polling, campaign paraphernalia, ethnic voting blocs, image making, even opposition research, smear tactics, and dirty tricks," he writes, all made their appearance, and most, "but not all, of these innovations were introduced by the Jacksonians" (p. 133). By comparison, Cole argues early on that the "democratic surge" often linked to Jackson's campaign "was well underway" by 1828, and toward the end of his volume he repeats that historians "have exaggerated the role of the election of 1828 in the rise of democracy" (pp. 11, 135). The election, rather, was historically significant in that it saw "the rise of national political parties" (p. 135). To an extent, of course, Parsons is discussing tactics while Cole highlights the larger movement. Yet readers might well wonder whether a democratic surge could truly exist without the high level of voter participation and the political weapons described in Parsons's account.

To prepare the reader for these tactics, Parsons opens his story with parallel biographies of the men who were to become bitter antagonists in 1828. In a fascinating upending of conventional historiography, which emphasizes how different the Harvard educated New Englander was from the unlettered frontier warlord, Parsons instead observes how similar they were in the early 1820s. Both were Republicans, both supported the War of 1812, both were expansionists, and both Jackson's sword and Adams's pen were devoted to "expelling any and all obstacles to that expansion" (p. 46). Even when it came to Native affairs, Parsons insists, "the Yankee and the frontiersman were in remarkable accord" (p. 47). At Ghent, Adams denounced British proposals for an Indian buffer state in the West, and he informed their negotiators that Britain was wrong in believing that setting aside "whole regions of territory to a few scattered hordes of savages"

would slow his nation's development (p. 47). Jackson could not have put it better.

What changed, of course, apart from Jackson's belief that he and the electorate had been denied their victory in 1824 due to a "corrupt bargain" between Adams and Henry Clay, was the rapidly developing market economy in the northern states. As Martin Van Buren watched in dismay as the recession of 1819 was largely ignored while Congress debated the future of slavery in Missouri, the *New Yorker* came to believe that the time had come "to commence the work of a general resuscitation of the old [Jeffersonian] democratic party" (both Parsons [p. 74] and Cole [p. 71] quote from this much-quoted missive). Both Parsons and Cole cite recent studies of the market revolution and its impact on political culture—especially Sean Wilentz, Charles Sellers, and Daniel Walker Howe—but only Cole has a single reference to "capitalism" in his index, and both authors might have devoted a few more pages to explaining why many Democratic voters remained wary of the emerging industrial order, while most National Republicans welcomed the transformation and embraced Clay's proto-industrial "American System."<sup>[2]</sup>

In saying that the "old" political divisions, that is, those that addressed economic and class rather than regional distinctions, were "the best," Van Buren hoped to decrease the recent "clamour [against] Southern Influence and African Slavery" (pp. 71, 72). The *New Yorker's* plan of ignoring the growing cancer of slavery in the name of returning the plight of the northern white working class to the nation's political agenda has not fared well with recent scholars, but Cole regards that as "unreasonable" (p. 73). To suggest that slavery was Van Buren's moral blind spot, Cole argues, is to engage in presentism and to judge Van Buren's actions by the standards of "twenty-first century Americans" (p. 72). What, he adds, did white "Americans then know about the problem of race" (p. 72)? Cole is surely right enough in suggesting that few white antislavery voters were "enthusiastic about having free blacks living next to them" (p. 72). But students and lay readers of these volumes may not be aware that slavery lingered in New York State until 1827, and while the Empire State was hardly South Carolina, the former governor could hardly claim ignorance as to his region's problems with racism. Federalist Rufus King was far more progressive than Van Buren on this matter, and Cole's defense of the party builder and future president on the grounds that he was no worse than most white residents of his state is faint praise indeed.<sup>[3]</sup>

Where Van Buren and Jackson believed the Missouri crisis was brought on by "Eastern interests" and Federalists hoping to revive their moribund party's fortunes, Adams thought the debates were the result of southern aggression. "Slavery," he observed with characteristic bluntness, was "the great and foul stain upon the North American Union" (Parsons, p. 64). As the election of 1828 approached, Adams grew ever more worried about the fate of his country, and a successful ticket of Jackson and John C. Calhoun, he warned, would be the first time in the Republic's history that two slaveholders occupied the presidency and vice presidency. Calhoun's defection to the Jacksonians and his replacement with Richard Rush, Parsons writes, also marked the only election prior to the Civil War when "two northerners were facing two southerners in a presidential campaign" (p. 171). As a result, Parsons argues, slavery was the election's "hidden agenda" (p. 173). Although neither campaign addressed the issue publicly, Virginia editor and Jackson supporter Thomas Ritchie routinely publicized the fact that most of Adams's backers had wished to restrict slavery from Missouri in 1820. Kentucky Congressman Henry Daniel played the race card by charging that Adams voters included blacks and mixed-race men, "who, in New England, are qualified voters," while antislavery voters in New York wondered aloud how Van Buren could endorse a slaveholder over "the only president selected from the northern states in thirty years" (Parsons, p. 173).

Because of the so-called corrupt bargain, the campaign for 1828 essentially began in 1825. Even specialists in the period will be surprised at how much time both Adams and Clay devoted to addressing the allegation, and Cole observes that, even as late as December 1827, an "Adams central committee" compiled documentation allegedly refuting the charge, which Clay used to craft his own defense (p. 139). Adams then edited the ninety-one page pamphlet, which was published by friendly National Republican editors. To an extent, Cole finds Adams's reliance on Clay "surprising," as the one-time rivals were so temperamentally different (p. 58). Yet "Clay was indispensable," Cole adds, "because he loved and understood politics" (p. 59). Perhaps, but loving politics did not necessarily make Clay particularly good at that game, and he did not understand how his appointment at State would cause "all hell [to break] loose," as Parsons aptly phrased it (p. 106). As Daniel Walker Howe once noted, "we do not always recognize the politician in John Quincy Adams" because of his antiparty tendencies. But he was "a politician who wanted very much to win."<sup>[4]</sup>

To better analyze the contest, Cole selected six states to examine. He chose the two largest and most metropolitan (New York and Pennsylvania), two rapidly growing western states (Kentucky and Ohio), and two slowly growing eastern states (Virginia and New Hampshire). These states were home to almost half of the population and the electoral votes, each offered a representative sample of the young Republic's economic diversity, and three featured the closest state races in 1828. Over the course of two chapters, Cole explores party organization and voting behavior in these six states, but at times the level of detail, while impressive, often obscures the larger picture, making this monograph more useful to specialists in the period rather than to students or even historians who work outside of the antebellum era. By comparison, Parsons paints his conclusions with a larger brush, and his inclusion of religion is particularly fresh. Like many New Englanders, Adams had little use for Catholicism, and during an 1821 Fourth of July oration he was foolish enough to publicly deride the Catholic Church as a "portentous system of despotism and superstition" (Parsons, p. 174). Democrats responded by inviting a Catholic bishop in Charleston to deliver the toast at a Jackson celebration, and orators cleverly if somewhat disingenuously appealed to both Protestant and Catholic Irish Americans by describing their candidate as "the son of Irish parents" (Parsons, p. 175). One pro-Adams newspaper little helped matters by writing that the nation was "degraded" by allowing Irish immigrants to enter, an editorial gleefully reprinted by the pro-Jacksonian *Argus* (Parsons, p. 175).

Both volumes conclude with victorious Democrats arriving in the nation's capital for the inauguration, and Parsons includes a brief conclusion regarding the future of the election's main actors. Van Buren, he notes, lived to see his alliance between southern planters and the "plain republicans" of the North dissolve over the question of slavery in the territories, as many of those middle-class voters abandoned the Democracy for Abraham Lincoln's new party. The first stirrings of that dissolution, of course, are the subject of Joel H. Silbey's examination of "the rough and ready" election of 1848, the first study of that critical contest in forty years. Like other volumes in the Kansas series, Silbey's book contains numerous illustrations and concludes with all three major party platform statements, as well as Zachary Taylor's inaugural address.<sup>[5]</sup>

Silbey begins his volume with a lengthy introductory chapter on James K. Polk's administration, and the problems his expansionism posed for northern Democrats,

such as Pennsylvania's David Wilmot. Polk's reputation has enjoyed something of a rehabilitation of late, but Silbey may be too charitable in writing that Polk's decision not to seek a second term was in part due to the increasingly angry national discourse, which had made Polk "an object of loathing and had so cruelly worn him down" (p. 46). Since the president's invasion of Mexico, as critics such as Adams and Lincoln observed, was a war of his choosing, young Democrats such as Wilmot might be forgiven for thinking that they were the ones cruelly put in an untenable political position. But Silbey is certainly correct in noting that Wilmot's attempts to restrict slavery from any new territories presented Liberty Party advocates with a difficult choice, since his proviso said nothing about abolishing slavery where it existed.

In hopes of finding some middle ground between slaveholding Democrat Polk and antislavery Democrat Wilmot, middle state moderates began to argue that the most sensible solution was to allow "the people of the territory to be acquired the business of settling the matter for themselves" (Silbey, p. 52). Although often identified with candidate Lewis Cass, Silbey, building on John M. Belohlavek's 1977 biography, demonstrates that Vice President George Dallas was the first to advance the policy that would come to be known as popular sovereignty.<sup>[6]</sup> Conservative New York Democrat Daniel Dickinson promptly introduced the concept as a Senate resolution in late 1847, after which Cass embraced the idea and made it, Silbey writes, "one of the cornerstones of his drive for the presidential nomination" (p. 52).

Other Democrats floated still other compromise solutions, and Secretary of State James Buchanan suggested extending the Missouri Compromise line west through what would become the Mexican cession. Not surprisingly, Senator Calhoun denounced Buchanan's recommendation as an unconstitutional assault on planters' rights in the common territories. Here Silbey misses the opportunity to remind his readers that in doing so, the brilliant Calhoun clearly outsmarted himself, since a federal guarantee of slave property in the Southwest was the best offer that southern slaveholders were likely to get.

Given so many options advanced by so many Democrats, it was inevitable that the Democratic Party began to unravel when they met in Baltimore's Universalist Church on May 22, 1848. With great eloquence and clarity, Silbey documents the convention's collapse into a melee of "much booing, cheering, name-calling," and rancorous debate, during which the party's "dirty linen," and especially the bitterly divided New York delegation's an-

imity, “was exposed to all” (p. 63). When the convention finally nominated Cass and crafted a platform that denounced congressional interference with slavery, few delegates from either section were pleased. As he was to do again in later years, Alabama’s William Lowndes Yancey stalked out in protest, while New York Barnburners concluded that the solution lay in “deserting a party” (Silbey, p. 68).

When the Whigs met to nominate war hero and Louisiana planter Taylor—and to issue a vague “declaration of principles” rather than a formal party platform—a number of Free Soil dissidents broke away and began to discuss fusion with disaffected Democrats. Silbey’s discussion of these negotiations is especially incisive, as he details the efforts of Ohio’s Salmon P. Chase to lead Liberty Party activists into the emerging Free Soil Party, even as militant abolitionists chose to stand by Gerrit Smith, who would become the Liberty Party’s standard bearer over the next decade. Silbey defends the Buffalo convention’s choice of Van Buren, arguing that given the New Yorker’s “long experience in electoral politics,” together with his new and tougher position on the territories, the former president “was clearly the best chance the new party had to shake things up” (p. 78).

Silbey is undoubtedly correct here, and even Chase, after admitting Van Buren’s past sins, insisted that only a candidate with his stature allowed for the possibility of keeping slavery out of the West. Still, it was no small irony that the politician who devoted decades to keeping slavery off the national agenda came to lead a movement that forced the two major parties to confront the issue. “Neither Whigs nor Democrats wanted the slavery extension issue to become prominent enough to dominate the campaign,” he writes (p. 105). So long as antislavery voters united around obscure protest candidates such as Smith, they could safely ignore the issue. With Van Buren in the race, slavery was not so easily ignored.

Silbey’s discussion of the election results is especially insightful. Although most historians who discuss 1848 note the impact that the Free Soil Party had on the results in the North, Silbey instead emphasizes the fact that voter turnout was at its lowest since 1836. The election of 1840 had witnessed a record turnout, and 1844 was not far behind. But unhappiness with all three candidates led to a drop of 7.2 percent from the previous contest. In the South, some Democrats defected to planter Taylor, but large numbers simply stayed home on Election Day. In Mississippi, Louisiana, and Yancey’s Alabama, as many as 25 percent of 1844 Polk voters simply abstained

in 1848. In the North, by comparison, 90 percent of Clay voters cast their ballots for Taylor, and in New York State, Van Buren attracted Democrats and Liberty voters. In Massachusetts, however, Whigs could not pass on the opportunity to vote for an Adams, and nearly half of that state’s Free Soil support came from men who had voted for Clay in 1844. Because Ohio and Indiana, with a total of thirty-five electoral votes, went to Cass because of Whig defections to Free Soil, the third party’s emergence, Silbey reasons, did not alter the electoral count. Had New York Democrats not defected to Van Buren, Cass, and not Taylor, would have captured the state’s thirty-six electoral votes, and so the shifting “successfully cancelled out each other’s determinative influence in the final results” (p. 145).

Taken together, these three important volumes demonstrate that elections matter. In the four decades that have passed since the publication of previous studies of these two elections, specialists in the antebellum era have examined a host of topics largely neglected by an earlier generation of political historians, from federal Indian policy to women’s rights, and from slave culture to the coming of the industrial order. Those subjects inform the three books here under review, and they are collectively the richer for it. But these books also remind us that the elevation to the presidency of slaveholder and Indian fighter Jackson, or the emergence of a determined Free Soil Party, affected far more people than the number of men who cast ballots.

#### Notes

[1]. Most of the volumes published to date by the Kansas series cover elections that took place after the Civil War. Roger Sharp, *The Deadlocked Election of 1800: Jefferson, Burr, and the Union in the Balance* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2010), regrettably, appeared too late to be included in this review. Parsons’s and Cole’s volumes replace Robert V. Remini, *The Election of Andrew Jackson* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1963), a lively yet now dated study, which was itself somewhat updated by the discussion of the election included in Remini’s own *Andrew Jackson and the Course of American Freedom, 1822-1833* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981).

[2]. See, in turn, Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York: Norton, 2005), 391-393; Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 324-326; and Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007),

355-356, 383-386, for their comments on the 1832 election.

[3]. See Graham Russell Hodges, *Root and Branch: African Americans in New York and East Jersey, 1613-1863* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 187-193, on the end of slavery in New York.

[4]. Daniel Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,

1979), 46-48.

[5]. Although now dated and replaced by Silbey's study, Joseph Rayback, *Free Soil: The Election of 1848* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1970), remains useful.

[6]. John M. Belohlavek, *George Mifflin Dallas: Jacksonian Patrician* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1977), 119-137.

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