

Whereas some scholars have argued that these facts illustrate a first step in the development of a civic democracy, others focus on the less appealing aspects. Historical arguments in the second group are wide-ranging, from a condemnation of politics in this period as a democracy for white men only, to a focus on the excesses of the raucous celebrations in the period. The following two essays touch on this last argument. Although Mary P. Ryan, Professor emeritus at the University of California, Berkeley, remains mindful of the inequalities of the period, she focuses on the democracy in the streets, which was as chaotic as it was colorful. But these celebrations, she contends, represent a public democracy that we rarely see today. In contrast, Glenn C. Altschuler and Stuart M. Blumin, both of whom teach at Cornell University, consider antebellum politics to be an expression of a "rude republic." Many Americans, they contend, were turned off by politics *because* of its boisterousness. Although they might honor the American republic, these historians conclude, people in the United States in this period did not honor American politics.

Antebellum Politics as Raucous Democracy

MARY P. RYAN

In April 1834 a crowd gathered at Castle Garden in New York for "a day of general rejoicing." This festival, which brought an estimated 24,000 New Yorkers to a civic landmark on the tip of Manhattan Island, was the culmination of three days of boisterous activity on the city streets. The day before, two competing parades had clogged the downtown thoroughfares. The first formed when an open meeting of 20,000 adjourned into a procession and "rigged up a beautiful little frigate in complete order and named it the *Constitution*. As this moveable political symbol passed down Wall Street it met up with a second procession and engaged in a mock naval battle with a vessel called *Veto*. A special kind of public ritual was in process. These were partisan processions staged by Whigs and Jacksonians in the course of an electoral campaign. The meetings, processions, and drama continued until about 10 P.M. on the third day of the voting, when some 15,000 souls gathered on Wall Street to learn the final tally of votes."

... Much of what is known as Jacksonian democracy was acted out on the same principles as the everyday sociability and holiday conviviality of the city. The meeting of October 1835 that launched the radical democratic politics of the Loco-Foco wing of the Jacksonian movement was recorded in the press as follows: "After the adoption of the resolutions a motion was carried that the meeting adjourn to the street in front of the Hall and form a procession with their antimonopoly Banners, Flags, etc., which was accordingly carried—and some thousands of the meeting bearing torches, candles, etc., marched up the Bowery cheering their Democratic citizens on the way." By the end of the

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1840s the enthusiasm had spread across the land. Whigs and Jacksonians locked horns in New Orleans as early as 1837, and in the 1849 municipal election the Democrats marched "through some of the principle [*sic*] streets with a profusion of June torches, making a splendid display. The principle feature of the procession was an artificial chicken cock of gigantic dimensions, triumphantly borne aloft, and which attracted universal attention." When San Franciscans elected their first mayor in 1850, their festivities included a band stationed on the balcony above the Plaza and a parade of carts pulled by teams of horses, adorned with flags and banners, and carrying voters to the polls. And this was just a primary election. The final polling featured a dashing equestrian display in the Plaza by one Captain Bryant, who carried off the office of sheriff. The Democrats also pitched a tent in the Plaza and named it "Tammany Hall." One of the first things that the forty-niners hastily unpacked on arrival in California were these rites of representation: ward meetings, parades, partisan loyalties.

Such public displays indicate that city people defined themselves not just according to ... social groupings ... but by the political status of citizen and by a range of partisan affiliations. Political campaigns were yet another example of the immense potential for associated activity in urban public space: They were staged, like civic ceremonies, in places such as Wall Street, the Plaza, "the principle streets of the city." But there was more at stake in these partisan gatherings than in [other] aspects of civic culture.... First of all, these partisan public events were a direct exercise of political citizenship and brought into play the doctrine of popular sovereignty, a title to rights, and a token of power. With his treasured (exclusively male) franchise, the citizen became an actual participant in self-government. Second, when sovereign citizens came together for expressly political reasons, they did something more than display their cultural differences; they acknowledged and acted on their interdependency and agreed implicitly to work together to achieve some things, however circumscribed, that could not be trusted to chance, the market, or individual effort. Third, [this] political culture... put urban heterogeneity to an extreme and decisive test. A partisan election placed different opinions in open competition: It was a declaration of civic war. A participant at the founding meeting of the Loco-Focos proudly described the event as "a struggle of gladiators on the platform around the chair;—the loudest vociferations are heard, and Tammany trembles with intestine war."

The contentious urban politics of the Jacksonian era was also, as Tocqueville had divined, a major stimulant to the frenetic formation of voluntary associations during the antebellum period. "In all the countries where political associations are prohibited, civil associations are rare. It is hardly probable that this is the result of accident; but the inference should rather be, that there is a natural and perhaps a necessary connection between these two kinds of association." Political events in New York, New Orleans, and San Francisco between 1825 and 1850 lend support to Tocqueville's inference. In fact the precise distinctions between politics, government, and more general urban associations are often difficult to determine. Antebellum citizenship was most always exercised in association with one's fellows: To the pioneers of antebellum democracy, the sacred civic

act was not a private exercise of conscience or the individual practice of intellect but, in the words of the Loco-Focos, "speechifying and resolutions at political meetings."...

Democratizing the Public

Public meetings were part cause and part effect of a major campaign to dissolve the bonds of deference that wove through republican institutions and to build democratic procedures. As of 1820 democracy was a relatively limited component of municipal government. The municipal charter of New York, for example, entrusted the public good to a common council that was composed of and elected by propertied citizens. Elected council members in turn rarely consulted with the citizenry, before or after they entered office. The passage from deferential republicanism to "pure democracy" was gradual but ultimately decisive. In 1821 the city of New York removed most all property restrictions on the franchise (making a pointed exception for those of African descent). The same reform was accomplished in New Orleans when a statewide constitutional convention met in 1845. City charters and state constitutions alike were rewritten to bind legislators closer to the electorate....

The purport of these reforms was to invest governmental legitimacy in representative procedures, whose advances in the 1830s and 1840s tell a familiar story: Elections became the critical act of a republican polity; the Jacksonians masterminded techniques of persuading voters; and electoral contests became a standoff between two principal party organizations. But neither the institution of representative government nor the creation of two parties was sufficient to create what the Loco-Focos would call pure democracy. That political ideal also reordered the relationships between voters and office holders, and among fellow citizens. Deference gave way to participation and converted harmony into opposition, which was the trademark of a public meeting.

Face-to-face congregations in public space were the most caustic solvents of the barrier between electors and office holders. As early as 1827, when the press had just begun addressing local issues, some public assemblages were defying the etiquette of deference. The *New York Evening Post* embraced direct democracy along with the party of Jackson in this account of a November rally: "The number who attended the late Jackson meeting in the park were so numerous and unprecedented.... Jackson is the favorite of the people." A Democratic meeting on March 28, 1834, illustrates the forward momentum of popular politics: It was called "The Great Meeting of the People—Triumphant Expression of Public Opinions." At about the same time the democratization of political institutions became a matter of debate in the Louisiana constitutional convention and moved candidates for office in New Orleans to announce themselves forthrightly as "Friendly to Popular Rights." Already in 1834 the *Bee* extolled the spirit that animated the Democratic public meetings of that era as "the power of the People when they declare their will."...

It was through the circuit of the public meetings, furthermore, that the spirit of democracy was thrust into the annals of the American political tradition.

Perhaps the most memorable public meeting of the era was that "Great Democratic Republican County Meeting" that took place in New York on October 30, 1835. Its claim to fame is the formulation of the major planks of the Democratic Party platform for well into the future—opposition to the national bank, tariffs, monopolies, and paper money. It is also justly famed for the flair of its democratic expression. This meeting made its historical mark after some party leaders, expecting a popular defeat, tried to terminate a nominating meeting by extinguishing the lights in the public hall. Then, as the story goes, "Total darkness, for a moment, prevailed; but in a twinkling of an eye hundreds of candles were pulled from the pockets of the people, which by the aid of Loco-Foco matches were immediately lighted and old Tammany, amid the cheers of the democracy blazed in her premature and resplendent glory."

The "cheers of the Democracy" that went up from the public hall in 1835 thrust the name "Loco-Foco" into the American historical record and have rightfully captured the attention of historians. Other principles, proclaimed in a more reserved manner at that meeting, also merit comment. The single largest concern of the twenty-four resolutions passed that evening in October was the rights and procedures of the public meeting. Resolution 6 put it this way: "the people have the right and duly at all times... to assemble together to consult for the common good." References to an older construction of the public, as some larger good that stood above and apart from the mixed and mundane interests of the citizenry, were overshadowed by appeals to the "people" as they "assembled together." The members of a public meeting were obliged to "Give utterances to their sentiments, give instruction to their representatives, and to apply to the legislature for redress of wrong and grievances, by address, petitions and remonstrances." Subsequent resolutions went on to spell out the procedures of popular expression, free assembly, direct elections, reduced terms in office, and majority rule. Two weeks later the *Evening Post* put this vernacular political theory forthrightly: "to carry on to the fullest extent the principles of pure democracy."...

Many antebellum politicians harbored a deep antipathy to the democracy of the public meeting. To James Brooks such political associations were hardly better than barnyard gatherings: "Men must be herded as cattle are herded. All classes, all parties, all occupations make use of societies for all purposes.... The societies of the day—not the thinking individual men who make them up—are the winds that often form the gale of public opinion." Others were still plotting to maintain suffrage as a privilege of the propertied and to install presidential authority behind the fortress of a ten-year term. But such antidemocratic sentiments were rarely spoken in a loud public voice after 1840. In the words of one historian the rivals of the Jacksonians maintained "An almost deafening silence on the entire subject of political democracy." When the political faction that opposed Andrew Jackson's attack on the Bank of the United States found its name, "The Whig Party," during the New York City municipal election of 1834, it entered the partisan fray on terms set by radical democrats. By organizing publicly in order to object to the policies of an administration sitting in Washington, they provided the final solidification of a democracy of difference: They practiced and legitimized open, institutionalized, popular opposition.

Well before the presidential election of 1840, which heralded the second party system at the national electoral level, the Whigs had gone public in New York and New Orleans. In New Orleans in 1837 they claimed "The Whig Party is actually the Democratic Party." And in New York they adopted the official title "Democratic Whigs." Soon the opposition employed the nominating procedures of the Loco-Focos, complete with ward-level public meetings and primary elections. They had installed a decisive, quite close, and cogent bipartisan political rivalry that would endure for fifteen years. As a number of historians have demonstrated, the Whigs and Jacksonians placed before the American people a clear set of ideological and programmatic choices on everything from finance to public investment, the judiciary, and the corporations. By the late 1840s the Whigs had capitulated to popular procedure and created a foundation for democratic contestation in each city. The *New Orleans Picayune* geared up for a "struggle" on election day; in San Francisco the *Alta Californian* endorsed a system of representation in which "everyone will have the opportunity to express his wishes"; and the *New York Tribune* published calls to meetings of "The Democratic Whig Party" in every ward of the city.

As the principles of democratic opposition spread from the Jacksonians to the Whigs and from the Northeast to the South and West, its physical setting became more picturesque. In New Orleans in the 1840s the haughty Whigs met at the St. Louis Hotel or the Exchange, while the more populist Democrats assembled in the open air along Canal Street. The first American-style election in San Francisco in the spring of 1850 revealed the range of spatial possibilities that had become available for electioneering purposes at midcentury. The Whigs called the faithful to deposit their ballots in a "Primary election" to take place "At the house on Clay Street, three doors below Elleard's." The Democrats chose their candidate at a primary election held in Portsmouth Square from 7 A.M. to 7 P.M. and then ratified the nomination with a mass meeting in the same central location, where they called for yet another public meeting a few days later. This announcement—"The rights of the people will Not be Sold. Independent Mass meeting to rally the nomination of the Independent Washington Club"—includes a special invitation to "mechanics, workingmen, and all who are opposed to private clichés and hackneyed politicians." Democratic procedures of nominating representatives had become habitual by 1850: They were transmitted across the continent, available to third parties, and already associated with "hackneyed politicians."

This aggressive public spirit was maintained through election day itself. The actual casting of votes ... reassembled the same people for a more prolonged, festive, and decisive public meeting. Ward meetings orchestrated this transition by appointing as many as 200 of their number to act as a "vigilance committee," pledged to stand watch over the polls for the duration of the balloting. At a time when municipalities restricted efforts to create a registry of voters as antidemocratic, the election was still a quite open convocation. The ward assemblies, nominating conventions, and elections were transfer points in a relay of authority, a direct passing of the baton of power unto another representation of the people. Meeting-place democracy shared in the public character of the civic

parade: It transpired in open urban space and was diffused through segments such as wards, centered in times and spaces such as election day, and invested with a festive and contentious sociability. In scarcely two decades the sedate and constricted republican form ... had been stormed and supplanted by the boisterous politics of the public meeting....

The Political Definition of the People

The rhetoric of democracy seemed forthright: It proclaimed the rights of all the people to participate in the process of representation. But democracy as an actual political practice was something else again: It almost always came with strings attached and with specific provisos as to which people counted at any particular time and place. Of the cities of New York, New Orleans, and San Francisco between 1825 and 1850, at least this much can be said: The ranks of "the people who counted" had expanded significantly. In fact one of the major consequences of the culture of public meetings was to beg the question of who were, exactly, the people.

The Loco-Foco meeting answered this provocative question in the expansive language of "Equal Rights," ostensibly welcoming everyone into the democratic public. The first of the Loco-Foco's fabled resolutions proclaimed that "all men are created equal"—that these United States are a nation—and that the national rights of every citizen are equal and indivisible." The third resolution elaborated, "That in a free state all distinctions but those of merit are odious and offensive and to be discouraged by a people jealous of their liberties." The principle was underscored again in resolution 4, which characterized all laws that would thwart "equal rights and privileges by the great body of the people [as] odious, unjust and unconstitutional." This notion of equal citizenship did not appear out of nowhere, however, or descend from high-minded universalistic principles of republicanism. It was championed by select social groups who had found in the public meeting a place to mobilize to claim their equal rights.

The notion of equal rights was the cutting edge (hardly the culmination) of a movement to expand access to democratic citizenship. In the early nineteenth century it was a political tool wielded most effectively by white males of the middling and lower social ranks. By the mid-1820s propertyless white men had secured the franchise, won the right to hold public office, and found a niche in the Democratic Republican Party. Soon this party of the "people" had booted the federalist "aristocracy" out of power across the nation. By the 1830s the ward-level meetings of Jacksonians styled their party the champions of the people against "the arts of the aristocracy" as practiced by the Whigs. The first mayor "ever elevated to that office by the suffrage of the people" was hailed in the *Evening Post* as a conqueror of "Besotted bank merchants" and champion of "the poor laborer who will not kneel at their footstool, who will not lay down his inestimable rights of equal political freedom, and consent to be their abject slave." By that raucous spring election of 1835 this rhetorical division of the people, between aristocrats and common men, had become a matter of electoral

strategy. The Jacksonian press noted, for example, that although the fifteenth ward "is considered [in] an especial manner as the quarter of the aristocracy, yet there are enough democrats residing within it to secure the success of the democratic ticket if they will but exert themselves with spirit." In that year the Jacksonians lost the fifteenth ward, but by only a small margin....

This is not to say that the political hospitality to difference was without its clear limits as of 1850. Some barriers to being counted among the people were left intact, and others were even fortified during the age of Jackson. The political public, the whole representative circuit from the ballot box and its contiguous spaces—the parade, the nominating conventions, the rowdy congregation at the polling places—to public offices and legislative assemblies, was a pristinely white and decisively male universe. The political invisibility of both women and nonwhites coexisted with their often vivid representation in civic culture and their relatively easy access to public space. This contradiction suggests that participation in formal politics, the right to act as a citizen, was by no means an automatic translation from social and cultural publicness. This quandary requires attention.

The barrier to participation in the political public was particularly effective against women. The demand for women's suffrage raised at Seneca Falls in 1848 was seldom heard downstate, where women were seldom given even a symbolic role in partisan activities. The notice that a place for the ladies had been reserved among the Whigs gathered at New Orleans's St. Louis Hotel in 1849 was a novel appearance of women anywhere near the sites of party politics. Likewise, women seldom formed truly *public* meetings....

The status of nonwhites in the democratic public was equally anomalous and foreboding. But in this case, exclusion from citizenship was, on occasion, posed as a public and political question. In New Orleans the slave system placed the political status of all those of African American descent beyond the pale of citizenship. But once slavery was abolished in New York, democrats had to consider the meaning of citizenship for nonwhites. The constitution of 1821, the same document that removed property qualification for whites, severely restricted African American suffrage. It stipulated that only those New Yorkers of African ancestry who possessed \$250 of property were entitled to vote. By this standard only 298 of almost 30,000 African Americans were granted the right. Yet this small group of enfranchised citizens pushed the democratic possibilities to their maximum. In 1837 they organized to end the property restrictions and succeeded (along with their white abolitionist allies in the Liberty Party) in placing their demands before the electorate. That referendum that demanded simply "Equal suffrage for Colored Persons" went down to a crushing defeat, by a margin of 2.6 to 1.

This mandate of the people made the hostilities to African Americans harbored by so many antebellum Americans a public matter. The Democratic Party was particularly quick to exploit these prejudices, saying, for example, that "Negroes are among but not of us" and vowing to "uphold our own race and kindred." The hostility broke out in vicious attacks on both African American neighborhoods and abolitionist conventions in New York in the 1830s....

As of 1849 the history of democratic political institutions seemed to be still advancing by precarious steps while dodging roadblocks such as race and gender. Perhaps Tocqueville's prediction of 1831 would prove right: "The further electoral rights are extended, the greater is the need of extending them: for after each concession the strength of democracy increases, and its demands increase with its strength." At the middle of the nineteenth century the progress of enfranchisement seemed to be moving onward and outward: It had leapt over distinctions of property, had beat back attempts to restrict the citizenship of the foreign born and Catholics, and had sidestepped the absolute racial standards of exclusion. Only the difference of gender seemed a categorical bar to full rights of citizenship. As of 1850 there was still a long way to go in establishing equality of citizenship, but the democratic project was set on a forward course....

The course of the democratic public through the 1830s and 1840s also ran roughshod over any refined notion of political protocol or decorum. The sheer number of what were called mobs or riots, disorderly expressions of public opinions on a panoply of issues, was higher than at any other time in American urban history. These minor civic wars were a fixture of antebellum democracy, and a goodly portion of them actually coincided with election campaigns. During the 1830s an election combined politics, ceremony, and donnybrook into one urban pageant and brought all sorts of civic differences jostling together in the streets. The processions through lower Manhattan described at the outset of this chapter and the ensuing battle between *Constitution* and *Veto* were classified as a riot in the great compendium of urban disorder collected by police chief J. T. Headley in 1873....

At the time, however, outbreaks such as this were taken more in stride, even reported in a jocular fashion. One contemporary observer of the rancorous election of 1834 reported that "A good temper prevailed" and provoked "nothing more serious as a black eye." Routine ethnic rivalries were often dismissed as "Irish shillelagh frolic" or "a furious fight ... which resulted in sundry broken heads and bloody noses." Indeed, although riots were regular occurrences in antebellum cities, they caused few fatalities. (A total of two lives were lost in scores of riots that plagued New York in the 1830s and early 1840s.) The raucous election scene in New Orleans in 1847 was reported with the same equanimity: "municipal election yesterday passed off with little disturbance ... some little squabbling" in the second municipality. Through most of the period this routine "high spirit" fell within the capacious range of civic tolerance. Not until 1845 in New York did rioting provoke a concerted attempt to establish a professional police department, and this initiative of a short-lived reform government resulted in only a minor buttressing of the old public-watch system....

In fact a riot was not so much a breakdown of democratic process as its conduct by another means. The electoral contests that were the life of a democracy were from the first washed in the rhetoric of warfare. The Loco-Focos' offensive in New York in 1835 was heralded as a "struggle of gladiators," and the whole Democratic cause was one of "Warring not against individuals but against a system of wrong and oppression." When the Whigs joined in open democratic contention, their war cries, especially in the belligerent words of James Watson Webb of

the *New York Courier and Enquirer*, were even more incendiary: calls to “armour, ... fire and sword” against the “enemy.” In other words the election “riots” condensed and gave a sometimes violent physical dimension to the conflict that was intrinsic to popular democracy. Any public meeting could cross over the border into a mob.... In sum, a riot was a species of political action not entirely unlike a public meeting. It was a congregation in open space to publish the collective opinion of a distinctive group. It was, like a partisan election, an act of civic warfare and an intrinsic part of what the *Evening Post* called “The great experiment we are making in popular government.” Late in the 1840s this forceful expression of civic differences was still within the bonds of urban civility.

Antebellum Politics as Political Manipulation

GLENN C. ALTSCHULER AND STUART M. BLUMIN

The political procession that one day disturbed the customary quiet of the House of the Seven Gables touched a “powerful impulse” in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s mysterious recluse, Clifford Pyncheon, to look out upon the “rush and roar of the human tide.” The view was, however, a disappointing one, as the partisans, with their “hundreds of flaunting banners, and drums, fifes, clarions, and cymbals, reverberating between the rows of buildings,” marched down too narrow a street and too close to Clifford’s window. “The spectator feels it to be fool’s play,” Hawthorne explains, “when he can distinguish the tedious commonplace of each man’s visage, with the perspiration and weary self-importance on it, and the very cut of his pantaloons, and the stiffness or laxity of his shirt-collar, and the dust on the back of his black coat.” To be majestic, the procession must be seen from a more distant vantage point, “for then, by its remoteness, it melts all the petty personalities, of which it has been made up, into one broad mass of existence,—one great life,—one collected body of mankind, with a vast, homogeneous spirit animating it.” Proximity might actually add to the effect on an “impressible person,” but only should he, “standing alone over the brink of one of these processions,... behold it, not in its atoms, but in its aggregate,—as a mighty river of life, massive in its tide, and black with mystery, and, out of its depths, calling to the kindred depth within him.”

As with the parade, so too, we would argue, with the more varied and complex processes of American electoral democracy—all can be seen from up close and from afar, by more and less “impressible” observers, absorbed in the animating spirit or attentive to the “tedious commonplace of each man’s visage,” beholding the “atoms” as well as the “aggregate.” Historians of the United States, observing closely or from a distance, have been impressed for a very long time with the animating spirit of the nineteenth-century political spectacle, and have developed a nearly consensual view of post-Jacksonian American politics as a genuinely massive activity in which the vast majority of ordinary Americans—white, voting males,