Chapter One

THE POLITICAL WORLD OF THE ANTEBELLUM PRESIDENTS

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America’s antebellum presidents operated within a political system that was settling into a well-defined pattern as Martin Van Buren entered the White House. The United States had become a large territorial expanse designed to grow even larger through conquest and treaties. The nation enjoyed a rapidly developing and often socially destabilizing economy stimulated by a transportation (the building of roads, canals, later railroads) and communication (a more effective post office system, the magnetic telegraph, the expansion of print media) revolution which began to overthrow, in Daniel Walker Howe’s words, “the tyranny of distance” as they knit the eastern seaboard with the growing area west of the Appalachian mountain range (Howe 2007: 203). Politically, the nation was contested ground made up of many different interests each seeking to shape a decentralized government system at the federal level and in the states to its advantage and, they argued, to the country’s benefit. During Van Buren’s years in office and in the administration of his successors, two distinct strains defined these divisions and characterized the nation’s formal political world of voters, elections, and government activities in which the president operated: a partisan one dominated by the presence and importance of two national political parties in the public life of the nation, and another, where the force of existing sectional tensions increased dramatically to become a major threat to the nation’s political stability. The long accepted understanding of this world put forward by several generations of historians was rooted in the early twentieth-century scholarship of the most eminent scholars of the era, Frederick Jackson Turner and Charles and Mary Beard and their students.
These “progressive historians” argued that the elements defining the Age of Jackson, that is, its economic and class-conscious themes and egalitarian commitments, were the key to understanding the central political currents of the time, the way that politics was conceived, how voters and parties reacted, how elections were fought, and how Congress, state legislatures, and executive officers went about their business (Beard and Beard 1927; Turner 1920; Hofstadter 1968).

Historians have paid much attention to the strong individuals who confronted one another in these years as they debated America’s future direction. At the center of this confrontation was the people’s hero, Andrew Jackson. Beginning with his ascension to the presidency at the end of the 1820s, an elite-dominated political system rooted in colonial-era and early national attitudes and practices began to give way to newer values, institutions, and behavior. Echoing the claims of the Jacksonians, scholars argued that the presidential election of 1828 was an uprising of the party of the people against entrenched and selfish power. Jackson and his colleagues stirred voters with their populist rhetoric directed against the undemocratic features of America’s government. Against them were powerful groups of opponents led by Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, and their associates promoting different sets of values, policies, and means of governing (Bowers 1922; Remini 1967, 1977–1984).

At their root, the battles echoed many of the confrontations seen earlier between Jeffersonian Republicans and the Federalists, a continuing struggle between eastern commercial elites – bankers and merchants, and their allies – against southern and western farmers, large and small, the latter joined by a growing urban working class who came to the polls to elect Jackson. Then, the aggressive and energizing new president used his office to challenge the status quo by continuing to mobilize the formerly politically dispossessed (because of voting restrictions) against the society’s poorer classes and raise the presidency to new heights of visibility and power in the quest for a more democratic nation. Once Jackson’s policy intentions were clear, two national political parties emerged each representing one of the different social levels involved in this conflict for control, the Jacksonian Democrats, built by those committed to the democratic uprising, and the Whigs, the repository of the power of the nation’s economic and social elites. It was a pattern that continued throughout Jackson’s two terms, as Robert Remini has forcefully argued in many books, as he faced down his opponents as they continued to defend powerful institutions that threatened the rights of the people. The president’s “war” against the Bank of the United States utilized the same stirring rhetoric as in his election campaign and was similarly an aspect of the popular uprising against those who dominated the political world for their own advancement (Remini 1963, 1967).
Jackson’s years in office encompassed more than a crusade for democracy. They also encompassed a welling up of sectional confrontation, first between some of the slave states and the national government over the limits of federal power and the rights of the states, a battle in which the president, as “the tribune of the people” (Silbey 1991: 8), once more railed on behalf of national authority and the preservation of the Union, and, second, between the slaveholding states and antislavery advocates in the North divided over the future of that institution, a confrontation already visible in Jackson’s time. In short, powerful class and sectional elements dominated the political scene from Jackson onward.

The characterization of the Age of Jackson proved to be a compelling narrative about the nature of the United States in this era, one synthesized and powerfully argued by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. in a classic expression of the progressive perspective in which he focused on urban workers as a significant force in the democratic emergence (Schlesinger 1945). All of this provoked, in turn, an enormous amount of scholarship among generations of historians who largely accepted its basic framework in their own work as the key to understanding the antebellum years. As several important reviews of the scholarly literature underline, studies of politics at the state level and the confrontations in Washington added new details fleshing out and reinforcing the story (Sellers 1958; Formisano 1976).

Emergence of a New Synthesis

Despite the widespread acceptance of the progressive synthesis, not everyone was convinced. Scholars such as Thomas Abernethy (1927) and Richard Hofstadter (1948), among others, were skeptical of the progressive historians’ claims, especially of Jackson’s alleged democratic achievements. Their skepticism became more widespread over time until one historian referred to the “dwindling confidence” in its efficacy as an explanation of the American scene (McCormick 1959: 397). Out of these hesitations those unconvinced by the dominant narrative began to bring together and articulate a quite different transformative perspective about the politics of the era, a perspective that was to take increasingly deep root among American historians from the 1960s on. Most of this revisionist scholarship kept to usual research pathways utilizing traditional approaches to historical scholarship to produce biographies and narrative descriptions of momentous events largely based on surviving contemporary documents, politicians’ correspondence, partisan newspapers, and party-generated pamphlets (Formisano 1976). Although such approaches appeared in abundance, and helped to frame a new understanding, there was, in addition, a shift toward a more precise description and analysis of various group roles and behavior
and the forces that underlay them. Much of the challenge to the old orthodoxy was rooted in what came to be described as the new political history that utilized methods and explanations of behavior originating in the social sciences and revealed by the quantitative measurement and analysis of elections and congressional behavior (Bogue 1983).

This work established a description of the American political fabric that has largely been in place since with filling in, clarification, and revisions of some of the points, as new findings were applied and new perspectives developed. Two key books, Lee Benson’s *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy* and *The Second American Party System* by Richard McCormick, set the stage for this reexamination by their direct challenge to, and complicating of, the current understanding. Their description of the political world played down the centrality of Jackson’s role in bringing a new, more democratic, political culture to the nation. There were two prime dimensions to their argument, the way that a different, more powerful, party system originated and grew to define, organize, and invigorate the political world, and a more complex, cross-class pattern to voting and political life generally, which raised, as a result, questions about the limits of sectional forces in American life (Benson 1961; McCormick 1966).

What distinguished McCormick’s study was his in-depth look at party development after 1815, the reasons that they emerged when they did, what the driving forces were that defined them, and how they developed into a dominant configuration characterized by widespread public participation and extraordinary staying power. Once political parties had been seen as fragile and volatile; now, the argument went, they proved able to sustain themselves through their organizational disciplining and ordering skills and the voters’ strong loyalties to them, loyalties that were passed down from generation to generation. Whatever the source of party choice due to the social tensions and ideological differences present in American society, once people joined their party they usually stayed put thereafter, committed, disciplined, and active members of the polity (McCormick 1966; Silbey 1991).

All of this was different from what had been the case earlier when parties were more ephemeral, characterized as they then were by fluid factional combinations and constant shuffling and recombinations among them and by a powerful antiparty ideology held by many Americans which denigrated such institutions as impediments to good government, all of which limited their reach, importance, and permanence. Now, however, the parties’ role and their reach into the fabric of the political world were unlike anything seen before, and the level of loyalty of voters to their party was, similarly, a new phenomenon. McCormick and several colleagues suggested a framework for placing this phenomenon within the whole course of American party history, dividing the whole into different systems each of them with
distinct characteristics that differed from one another. In this scheme, developed most extensively by the political scientist Walter Dean Burnham, the antebellum period from the late thirties into the fifties, that is, the era of the “second American party system,” was particularly marked by the unprecedented extensive participation of the politically involved, voters and leaders, and the acceptance of their necessity and permanence in the political world (Burnham and Chambers 1967; Hofstadter 1969; Wallace 1968; Burnham 1970; Silbey 1985, 1991).

Unlike the parties that developed after 1790, the Whigs and Democrats were nationwide in reach, appeal, and organization, important in both slave states and free states, in the West as on the eastern seaboard, closely competitive in many places, drawing support across the social spectrum. The Democrats largely dominated the era at the polls (between 1837 and 1861, they controlled the presidency two-thirds of the time and largely dominated Congress as well). But they were always vigorously challenged by their Whig opponents who, after some hesitation, accepted the necessity of parties and adapted themselves to them. To be sure, not all Americans were committed to one or the other of the two main parties. There were always outliers who did not fit into the dominant partisan framework. But the overwhelming number of those who voted were. On election day party dominance was the most compelling aspect of the situation (Silbey 2001; Shade 1981).

McCormick’s research pointed out that, contrary to the progressive narrative, voter turnout did not surge when Andrew Jackson appeared on the scene. States had been liberalizing their voter eligibility laws for some time, with a large increase in those permitted to participate at the polls including the propertyless at the lower reaches of the social scale, an increase that made almost all adult white males eligible to vote by 1840. In the 1828 presidential election there was no “mighty democratic uprising” in Jackson’s favor from the newly enfranchised (McCormick 1960: 293). In the two elections in which Jackson had run, turnout at the polls, while higher than in earlier presidential contests, was exceeded by the numbers coming to the polls in state-level contests before Jackson’s alleged democratic mobilization campaigns. The surge at the presidential level occurred later when the political parties organized and faced one another in harshly fought elections and voters turned out in impressive numbers in both state and national contests at a higher rate, in percentage terms, than when Jackson originally ran. This led McCormick to focus attention on party maturation and their organized voter turnout efforts as the key to the increase in political involvement. At every level, voters had to be convinced to do the right thing on election day. Election could go either way and there was too much at stake not to get your supporters to the polls. As McCormick sums up, after 1828, “as balanced organized parties subsequently made their appearance from
state to state, and voters were stimulated by the prospect of a genuine contest, [at the presidential level] a marked rise in voter participation occurred” (McCormick 1960: 301).

What gave the parties their strength, Roy Nichols argued, was their success in drawing voters to them due to their determined connecting with the voters through their circus-like arousal qualities and their strong, convincing statements about their policies as the best means to attain what the voters wanted and the nation needed. They held different perspectives on the nation’s problems and about the solutions necessary to address them, and unstintingly argued for them on the hustings, in Congress, and at the state level. All of this deepened commitment and polarization. Campaigning for the presidency such as the “Hurrah campaign” of 1840 and many others as well changed the way that Americans approached and understood their politics, what was at stake, and what they should do (Gunderson 1957; Nichols 1967).

Party leaders played a key role in this emerging system mostly at the state level. They were the center of most political activity. Fully embedded in the political apparatus, they were both representatives of their parties’ values and policies and an important participant in carrying through on them, formulating campaign strategy, helping to choose candidates, getting out the party’s message, and dispensing patronage in the interest of their party. Most of all, they focused on the voters, seeking to direct them to behave in a disciplined manner on behalf of their party. The leaders did not oversee elaborate nationwide or state-level organizations, relying mainly on volunteer loyalists at the local community and state levels to carry out the necessary tasks. It was not until 1848 that a party national committee made up of representatives from each state was organized to correlate Democratic activities across the nation. As usually was the case with organizational matters, the Whigs followed behind their opponents (Nichols 1967).

Even without many formal connecting institutions, national and state organizations were more interrelated than at earlier times by their advocacy, needs, and common commitments. Party conventions of delegates “fresh from the people,” as Jackson labeled them (Jackson 1835), appeared at every political level from local and state to national meetings in presidential years when party members from across the country named their candidates and united their supporters behind a platform setting forth their principles and intentions. Each party developed a new, more raucous, and polarizing campaigning style to attract the numerous voters now part of the system and to ensure the full turnout of their supporters on election day. They spent an enormous amount of effort defining themselves and their opponents in their rallies, campaign speeches, and pamphlets circulated to the faithful. Their gospel and claims were transmitted widely by a network of partisan newspapers such as the Washington Globe and New York Tribune.
and hundreds of others throughout the nation. Their rhetoric was harsh, their images gross, their claims and accusations inflated. When candidates, including those running for president, were nominated, they could expect merciless treatment from the opposition press and from its stump speakers (Shade 1981; Silbey 1991).

The recognition of the importance of the party leadership in all of these activities was underlined by the fact that state party leaders often rose to high offices in their states and at the national level due to their organizational and managerial competence, their loyalty, and their commitment, rather than because of any claims to their statesmanlike qualities. Whatever their talents, the presidents who followed Jackson no longer had the credentials of statesmen, that is, the experience in national and international affairs that their predecessors had had. As acknowledged partisan leaders the presidents were caught up in the extension of a partisan political culture and its contentious qualities.

This second American party system was a relatively stable one with the dominance of the two parties recognized by all but a small band of challengers. But all was not smooth sailing for party leaders. They had to deal with frequent internal disagreements as different factions struggled over specific policies, priorities, and preferred candidates. Such factional differences affected state parties and disturbed the smooth functioning of the national conventions as they sought to bring all together, differences party leaders hoped would end once the campaign began. Usually they were, occasionally they were not. The running sore between the Barnburner and Hunker factions bedeviled the New York Democrats in the 1840s for one prominent example. Massachusetts Whigs split into “Conscience” and “Cotton” factions over their different positions on slavery extension in the same years. Some state parties, such as the Pennsylvania Democrats, were bedeviled by personal factions waging war against one another over their support for different leaders (Eyal 2007; Brauer 1967; Snyder 1958).

These moments of division excited many, were often difficult to reconcile, and a number threatened party fortunes in particular elections. But, no matter how much party leaders found themselves hamstrung and frustrated, these factional divisions did not alter the partisan climates until other matters interceded in the 1850s. Party members remained loyal, their behavior primarily influenced by the party label on election day, and acted accordingly. There was usually a close relation between who voted for each party from election to election (Silbey 1991).

The outliers who did not fit into the dominant partisan framework included contemporary advocates of the centrality of sectional issues in both North and South who sharply differed with the partisan direction of American politics. John C. Calhoun, often an officeholder and presidential hopeful, who spent time in both the Democratic and Whig
parties, but who feared and distrusted both, more often acted to build alternative coalitions in favor of defending states’ rights against federal power or, later, the South against its enemies (Freehling 1965; Wiltse 1944–1951; Cooper 1978, 1983).

Minor, less permanent third parties of various kinds appeared from time to time, some original creations, others as splinters from the two main parties striking out on their own: the Anti-Masons, the People’s, the Liberty, various urban working men’s organizations, the Free Soil, and, later, the Know Nothing, participated from time to time in both local and national elections. At some moments minor parties seemed to have enough support, not to win a particular contest but to affect the outcome of an election or two. Despite that, most voters behaved as committed Whigs and Democrats on election day whatever the efforts of factionalists and third-party dissidents (Voss-Hubbard 2002; Formisano 2008; Silbey 2009; Wilentz 1984).

Not all Americans were fully accepted as part of the emerging partisan nation. So far as the formal political arena was concerned, the United States was largely a white man’s republic, although both women and, to a lesser extent, blacks were involved in political life in a range of ways outside the ballot box from which they were barred. In the years after 1837, in a nation where only men could vote, many women came into the political world by their own efforts on behalf of certain issues. As many scholars of women’s involvement point out, they had a lot on their minds in this era. Some acted primarily outside formal political activity, persistently working in various reform movements. Others went further. Much of what they did included their immersion in formal politics as they sought government action to meliorate unacceptable conditions. They worked hard to convince legislators through petitions, editorials, and direct confrontation to extend suffrage rights to women, while Dorothea Dix played an important role pressuring Congress as it debated and passed a bill to provide federal funds for asylums for the insane and in trying to persuade presidents to sign it when it passed (President Pierce vetoed it) (Keyssar 2000; Ginzberg 1990; Hewitt 1984; Brown 1998). As Karen Offen has summed up this research, “the history of feminism as political history necessarily embraces women’s ongoing quests for educational equity, economic opportunity, civil rights and political inclusion” (Offen 2011: 22).

Blacks, too, although not permitted to vote (although some states had allowed them to do so earlier), did actively participate in lobbying of legislators and other forms of political agitation such as pamphleteering and occasionally even speaking in public on behalf of their great cause, the abolition of slavery. These moments of participation for both blacks and women were obviously limited but did play some role in the development of the nation’s political culture (Keyssar 2000; McFeely 1991; Silbey 2009).
In the *Concept of Jacksonian Democracy* Lee Benson also took aim at the progressive perspective, arguing that politics from the 1820s on was less embedded in an Age of Jackson and its alleged striving to expand democracy to include the common man, whatever the contemporary rhetoric voiced and claims made. Like McCormick, he based his analysis on quantitative evidence, election returns, and census data, while also using social science concepts and traditional literary evidence to explain what the numbers meant. Most of the time, he argued, politics was filled with constant conflict as the progressive historians argued. But such conflict did not primarily incorporate and reflect socioeconomic divisions based on wealth and occupation between a social and economic elite and the common folk (Benson 1961).

There was always a certain amount of class tension and resentment expressed by editors and speakers – of both parties – as well as by members of minor parties. Some voters expressed such attitudes when they went to the polls. But that did not translate into a clear pattern governing behavior on election day or in legislative assemblies when they met. When New York enfranchised previously ineligible poorer elements in the state in the 1820s, each “did not upset the political balance by throwing his weight heavily on the side of one party. Either he did not vote, or he showed as much preference for one party as the other” (McCormick 1959: 409). There were always anomalies but whatever class consciousness existed in American life, its impact on voting and legislative activity was sporadic. When economic matters influenced behavior, they were largely over differences between people in commercial areas and those in less economically developed places (Benson 1961; Howe 2007; Watson 1990).

For all of their populist exhortations and claims, therefore, Benson argued, the Democrats were not a class-based party. Nor were their rivals. Although the Whigs were more hesitant about it than the party of Jackson, the Whigs, too, came to accept what Benson labeled “the Age of Egalitarianism” with its dominant egalitarian values and political style and the need, therefore, given the great increase in the number of eligible voters, to play the populist political game to attract voters across class lines as they sought victory on election day (Benson 1961; Gunderson 1957).

Finally, most political leaders were largely drawn from the upper reaches of society as they had always been. Even the Jacksonians, whatever their claims, and whatever historians have said about their appeal to the common man and the nature of Jacksonian constituencies, did not come to their leadership positions simply by being from the lower orders of society themselves. Like their Whig opponents, they were lawyers, newspaper editors and proprietors, plantation owners, and similar types – rich and middling sorts and local notables as political leaders had traditionally been. Some activists did struggle through to leadership positions from further down the
social order but not many – and by the time they arrived they had risen into the wealthier classes as professional men, merchants, and similar types (Benson 1961; Pessen 1984; Kutolowski 1989; Wooster 1969, 1975).

If the progressive model of parties, their leaders, and voters does not conform to what was actually the case in this period, the obvious question remains what motivated the parties and their loyal supporters? There has been much scholarly research completed and many interesting ideas offered about the impulses driving politicians and voters to act as they did. McCormick had stressed the party leaders’ office-seeking goals as their primary motivation. They were not as ideologically driven as suggested by earlier scholars. On the other hand, while this was an important element – the parties did focus much attention on winning elections – Benson argued that their efforts had a larger purpose as well. He was interested in how the entire social context of the nation – America’s political geography – shaped outlooks and behavior. He, too, suggested that popular voting was not neatly rooted in a single causative element dividing Americans that overrode all else. America’s cultural heterogeneity, its socioeconomic diversity, the mix of cleavages present, all affected by the context of the moment, and modified by local variations, reflected and defined the variety of competing interests involved in American elections in the antebellum era. Most critically, he underscored the continuing importance of the endemic tensions between different ethnoreligious groups as the key indicator of popular political choice. But he did not limit political behavior to that single factor despite the importance that he attributed to it (Benson 1961; Formisano 1976). Other scholars developed and extended Benson’s argument. Richard Carwardine has pointed out that evangelical Protestants had strong religious outlooks and commitments which filtered into their party choice. He, Robert Kelley, and Daniel W. Howe argued that, like economic interest groups, ethnoreligious groups had political interests that they wished to advance or defend, and they did so through their voting behavior. Party differences were based on existing and long-standing hostility among different groups in society emerging from deeply rooted prejudices among diverse religious and national groups, including their different perceptions of acceptable behavior, differences over how America was to be defined, and who was (or should be) an American. Certain traditional ethnoreligious groups, practicing evangelical Protestants, those from Anglo-Saxon backgrounds, and many non-Catholic Germans wished to promote a moral society, with its institutions driving out what they considered to be irrational and dangerous forces threatening the nation’s future. Benson and others concluded that their conflicts and political behavior had to be taken seriously in order to understand American politics in the antebellum era (Benson 1961; Formisano 1976; Carwardine 1993; Swierenga 1990; Kelley 1970).
The work originated by McCormick and Benson, in Formisano’s words, “was to shake dramatically the conventional faith in economic determinism in explaining voting” (Formisano 1976: 59). As their counternarrative emerged, it was elaborated and anchored by a range of studies that developed and enlarged their findings. A number of scholars engaged in state-level studies that tested the ideas in different places. Ronald Formisano’s studies of Michigan and Massachusetts, and William Shade’s work on Illinois and Virginia were important extensions of the rising understanding. They, too, confirmed that most voter choice was shaped by party identification based, in turn, on such matters as family tradition and their cultural identity and values, often ethnoreligious in origin, as well as their distinct outlooks toward the role of the government in the economy (Formisano 1971; Shade 1972). Other scholars looked to the South. Both Marc Kruman and Harry Watson looked South and found similar impulses present in North Carolina (Kruman 1983; Watson 1981). These “careful local studies,” Howe argued, “indicate that such [party] membership was often determined by a combination of mutually reinforcing moral and economic motives” (Howe 1991: 1228).

These commitments existed side by side with the other causative factors present. In Howe’s comprehensive study of the first half of the antebellum era he describes the importance of both ethnoreligious divisions and different economic interests in shaping not only party identification, but popular voting as well, the relative importance of each depending on the situational contest in which an election was held. He clarified how these elements operated in what he labeled a cultural approach to political analysis which “would lead us to view party affiliation as a function of membership in a community sharing common values” (Howe 1991: 1228). In action the political parties reflected and represented different perspectives, distinct and contrasting approaches, and what policies were needed to achieve the kind of nation they envisioned, a reality that attracted different groups to each.

Evangelical Christians sought to impose their values and ways of behaving on other groups, often through government actions at the federal, state, and local levels. They pushed for legislation to reform schools, restrict the use of alcoholic drinks because of their debilitating impact on individuals, and to limit immigration, all directed against other religious and ethnic groups, especially Irish Catholics. They sought vigorous policymaking in the economic realm as well, arguing for a strong national authority promoting development through a national bank, tariffs, and internal improvements legislation to develop the nation’s transportation network. Many of them would use the same authority to limit or end slavery. Generally, these groups joined the Whigs, a party that believed in the need for a strong central authority to uplift America economically and
morally (Holt 1999; Benson 1961). The Whigs were, in Howe’s words, “agencies of modernization.” They promoted a disciplined society as necessary for the good of the nation’s progress (Howe 1991: 1217).

Those being pushed pushed back. The Democrats, who drew support from groups antagonistic to the evangelical and modernizing impulses of the Whigs, were traditionalist in their approach to society and government. They believed in, and sought to limit, the authority of the federal government on all aspects of the domestic scene. They saw no need for a range of moral legislation that limited individual and community rights to live as one pleased. They strongly objected to such government interference in personal matters and behavior, religion, schooling, and activities such as alcohol consumption. In the economic realm, many were skeptical of commercial activity as threatening to their values and the way of life most Americans wished to pursue. They demanded policies that usually privileged the states over federal authority, were hostile to banks and special privileges for commercial groups, resisted high tariffs to promote certain interests over others, and were, in general, against the federal government doing things that the states or private interests did such as the financing of internal improvements (Benson 1961; Collins 1977; Howe 1991: Gerring 1994).

At the same time, Democrats believed in a strong presidency. In their eyes the president was “the tribune of the people” representing each American’s interests and defending their liberties and the nation’s virtue against those who would act against the rights of the people. In contrast, Whigs feared “the menace of Caesar,” that is, the overreaching power of a too ambitious president. Conscious of the fragility of liberty throughout history where earlier republics had been overthrown by strong, often military, leaders, they wanted the American president to be closely monitored and reined in by the legislative branch (Holt 1999).

Historians have noted how the federal government focused on nation building and development in this era: territorial expansion and organization, legislation making federal-owned land available for settlement after removing the Indian tribes from them, and the developing of a transportation network linking the growing nation, first roads and canals (although state and local governments usually did more than the national one in these efforts), then the subsidizing of railroad construction as well as financing water transport improvements. In Congress economic development issues made up the agenda of both parties: rivers and harbors legislation, banking, and the tariff all were prominent in both Whig and Democratic platforms and campaigns and came into Congress for resolution (Taylor 1951; Goodrich 1960; McCormick 1986; Larson 2001; Alexander 1967; Silbey 1967).

This focus raised questions about some of the arguments seeking to explain popular voting. How could a politics largely rooted in local interests,
values, and relationships relate to, and interact with, national politics, particularly the kind of policy matters dealt with by the national government? There was clearly a wide gap between the worldviews of political leaders struggling over macroeconomic issues and many of the voters who were influenced by local concerns and ethnoreligious matters. It was a gap that could be, and was, bridged by the way that parties presented themselves to the voters by linking the larger matters to the motivations of those coming to the polls. Overarching party ideologies that knit the various groups together in a rapidly developing, multicultural, pluralist society sought to define political choice. They brought together policy orientation, deeply rooted ideological perspectives about government authority, and different economic interests, as well as occasional moments of caste and class consciousness and resentment (Gerring 1994; Howe 1979, 2007; Holt 1999). Such efforts came together successfully as Van Buren sought reelection in 1840. As Formisano sums up that election, “improvements in communications, the maturation of mass party organizations, the decline of deference, the cresting of a fully extended white male suffrage, the injection of moral issues into politics, and the economic shocks of the late 1830s came together with social group predispositions to produce an exciting campaign and Whig victory” (Formisano 1993: 678).

Beginning with the difficult economic panic of 1837, the national parties’ strong policy differences shaped political warfare well into the ensuing decade. Most of those involved approached these issues through the lens of partisan commitment and belief. When the Whigs were in power in the early 1840s they successfully passed a high tariff bill and moved to create a new national bank among similar commercial-oriented legislation. The Democrats strongly opposed these efforts and passed laws under President Polk turning back Whig accomplishments and plans, including reinstating a lower tariff and creating an independent treasury to handle financial matters instead of having to rely on the Whig-favored national bank.

These partisan efforts occasionally broke down somewhat, particularly over federally financed rivers and harbors improvement legislation, which some Democrats joined the Whigs in supporting for constituency reasons. But they were not a large group and were usually forestalled by the Democratic presidents, Polk and Pierce (Larson 2001; Bergeron 1987).

Despite efforts to advance economic growth, most scholars have pointed out that the federal government was not all that energetic, exercising little power in the domestic arena. The post office was the largest representative of national authority on the scene with a presence throughout the nation, its postmasters and clerks comprising the bulk of the federal workforce (John 1995). The latter also included officials in customs houses and the general land office but federal activities were not focused on regulative laws or providing assistance to the less fortunate in society. Despite the strong
differences enunciated when either party was in office the range of
government activities was never as extensive as their contrasting ideologies
suggested. To be sure, if the Whigs had controlled the federal government
more than they did, their program would probably have gained more trac-
tion and federal authority more reach. Instead, America has been described
as having “a stunted national state” exemplified by “a lame and halting
government” (Keller 2007: x, 113). It was the states that exercised a wide
range of development and regulative activities.

In these years women, too, expanded their political role, despite their
continued failure to be allowed to vote. A number of scholars of women’s
role in American society argue that partisan activity in election campaigns was
often part of their activity in addition to their long-recognized efforts lobby-
ing for reform objectives. Many women had strong partisan opinions and
some of them participated directly as party workers in campaigns, attending
and raising their voices by parading, making speeches at rallies, and working
to get out the vote for their party. Elizabeth Varon’s study of their activities
in Virginia on behalf of the Whigs in the election of 1840 delineates their
vigorou s and sustained participation that year. Many women considered
the Whigs to be friendlier to the types of reform they sought than were the
Democrats. Similar activities in the male-dominated political world occurred
elsewhere in the nation from the early 1840s onward (Varon 1998; Howe
1991; Zboray and Zboray 2010).

In addition to the activities of women, black political activity also
increased in the 1840s. The antislavery Free Soil Party courted black leaders
such as the ex-slave orator Frederick Douglass in 1848. He and other blacks
participated in the party’s national convention that year. They also engaged
in campaign activities directed against the major parties. These were
limited to certain states and vigorously resisted by most politically minded
Americans (McFeely 1991; Silbey 2009).

The Sectional Dimension

Americans lived in a partisan political nation. In addition to the battle bet-
ween the national political parties, however, sectional tensions rooted in
important differences between separate regions of the country provoked an
increasing amount of conflict after 1837. Battles involving easterners versus
westerners, southerners versus northerners, and subsets within each section
were a familiar aspect of American politics. Charles and Mary Beard and
Frederick Jackson Turner were sensitive to the importance of such battles
as Congress demonstrated early on when it dealt with Indian policy, the
western lands, and various development issues and their consequences
(Turner 1935; Beard and Beard 1927). Before the emergence of a national
party system there was also a sectional quality in presidential contests as candidates received their primary support from voters from the same areas as themselves. Nevertheless, despite the fact that the tensions had sometimes developed into angry confrontations with a great deal of uproar, they lasted only a short time, particularly after the settling in of a two-party system that was busily fighting about different things.

Whatever the alternatives, sectionalism ultimately triumphed in the United States and the Civil War occurred. Scholars have thoroughly followed the sectionalizing theme in the many works published about the events leading to the North–South conflict as they seek to explain secession: the nation’s ultimate political failure. The classic studies of the nation’s road to the Civil War have been much in agreement when describing the role that sectionalism played in politics after 1837 as clear cut and determinative, despite scholarly differences over details, emphasis, and perspectives. Historians such as Avery O. Craven and Allan Nevins published important narratives in the 1940s and 1950s covering the era and elaborating the critical sequence of events that erupted, considering the reasons for, and the consequences of, actions taken, suggesting when leaders made missteps, and what the deficiencies were that allowed the sectional crisis to play out as it did (Craven 1942, 1953, 1959; Nevins 1947, 1950). Other scholars followed their lead and pursued similar themes in the many books about the years after the mid-1840s. In particular, David Potter’s magisterial study of the impending crisis between the North and South stands out as a sophisticated detailing of events and explanation of the centrality of sectionalism running through these years (Potter 1976).

These accounts recognized that the national political parties with their particular focus and broad support constrained sectionalism to some degree for a time. Both Whigs and Democrats had to deal with general sectional uproars but also with sectional tensions within their parties. When such eruptions occurred political leaders from the president down spent much of their time dealing with them with much success. Party leaders played down the differences exposed, played up their joint commitments as party members to their party and its policies regardless of section, and, if necessary, found ways to appease angry sectionalists as best they could. Their efforts usually worked. As early as the multi-candidate presidential election of 1836, with its four Whig factional candidates, from different regions of the country, Daniel Howe points out, “party trumped sectionalism as a basis for political effectiveness” (Howe 2007: 488).

The main point of most narratives, however, was that the tensions between North and South were deep, sustained, and steadily increasing during the antebellum years. Abolitionists and Free Soilers, united by their hostility to slavery, although divided by what that meant in policy terms – ending the institution in the abolitionist case, restricting it to its
current boundaries in the case of the Free Soilers – protested vigorously against the state of American politics. Seeing the existing major parties as compromised and unwilling to deal with slavery’s presence, they brought their demands into the political arena in the 1840s (Sewell 1976; Stewart 1976, 2008).

Southerners, not unexpectedly, reacted against perceived threats to their system and way of life so that more and more sectionally charged confrontation occurred, stimulated particularly by the acquisition of new territories. That event provoked angry turmoil in Congress over an issue that, as Michael Morrison suggests, had largely been a partisan one, as northerners and southerners now fought in Congress about whether slavery should be allowed into the new areas acquired from Mexico. The introduction of the antislavery extension Wilmot Proviso in 1846 markedly sharpened the confrontation only partially constrained by the legislative compromise that followed (M. Morrison 1997; C. Morrison 1967). As a result, the standard statement about the coming of the Civil War argues that partisan strength in national politics declined substantially as the simmering sectional forces took hold. Compromise remained possible but the atmosphere remained ominous and unstable (Nevins 1947, 1950; Craven 1953).

In the mid-1850s a sharp clarifying explosion occurred, an electoral upheaval that dangerously fueled the sectional impulse beyond anything seen before. The passage of the Democratic-sponsored Kansas-Nebraska bill allowing slavery into areas previously closed to it by earlier congressional compromises led to an increase in the numbers of those opposed to the South’s “peculiar institution” and to the South’s alleged control of American politics. In the view of most historians, the stunning defeat of so many northern Democratic congressmen and other party officeholders in the congressional and state elections was a major turning point in antebellum political history. The electoral revolt cracked the prevailing stability wide open and led to an even more intense sectionalizing of American politics (Potter 1976; Gienapp 1987).

This was not a temporary shift but a cosmic one. Faced with the intensity and depth of this eruption, scholars suggested that the political climate shifted, the parties giving way before the rising sectional tide as it gained more and more force. A frequent assertion became commonplace in the literature, that the party system had run out of gas in the early fifties, its traditional political differences either settled or no longer relevant, allowing the disagreements over slavery to fill the political void. “The old party system foundered on the rocks of obsolescence and slavery” (McClintock 2008: 24). Both the Democrats and Whigs, the narrative continues, faced with destructive internal sectional conflict among their supporters, began to splinter badly over the issues raised in Kansas and Washington, divisions which ultimately led to the weakening of the Democrats and the collapse
of the Whigs (Nichols 1948; Holt 1999; Earle 2004). Amid much fragmentation, the emergence of the Republican Party built on the support of antislavery advocates including departing members of the old parties became the key political confrontation at the moment. Unlike the old parties, the Republicans had little or no strength in the southern states given the new party’s threatening commitment against the interests of that section (Potter 1976).

Many scholars have reinforced and deepened our understanding of how this sectional impulse ultimately triumphed. Eric Foner wrote an influential description of the free-soil commitments of the new Republican Party in which its advocacy of a free labor ideology and its consequent resistance to slavery and the Slave Power that it believed controlled the country through its dominance of the Democratic Party played a key role in winning voter support. The times, the party’s ideology, and its commitment against the further expansion of slavery drew thousands to the cause (Foner 1970; Fehrenbacher 2001).

At first, the fledgling Republicans competed for votes with the nativist Know Nothings who had also emerged in the early fifties in reaction to the massive immigration of alien groups from Europe, particularly the Irish and Catholics. The Know Nothings surged at the polls in the early 1850s as their ideas were formalized in platforms and election campaigns. So strong was their growth that some contemporary observers suggested that the Know Nothings, not the Republicans, would win out as the nation’s second major party to compete with the Democrats for political control. But, the narrative continues, the nativists fell back before the growing sectional confrontation and the series of events that continued to fuel it (Foner 1970; Sewell 1988; Earle 2004).

This classic story was developed and refined by a great number of state studies of party decline and the consequent road to secession. Professor Craven at the University of Chicago, and colleagues elsewhere, established the template. They directed dissertations that covered individual state developments focusing on the rise of the Republicans in the North and the sectionalizing of the Democrats in the South in reaction to antislavery uproar. In these studies, the authors, following the lead of Craven and others, incorporated and reinforced the classic story in the architecture and details of their respective volumes (Rosenberg 1972; Maizlish 1983; Johnson 1977; Link 2003). Some added complexities and some new perspectives but the essential story of the sectionalizing of American politics was sharply etched (Barney 1972, 1974; Thornton 1978; Crofts 1989).

Despite its widespread acceptance, however, some scholars, the so-called “new political historians,” began to challenge the standard account of the sectionalizing of American politics. They argued that historians of the coming of the Civil War had not dealt as effectively with the nativist...
presence and their role in breaking up the parties as they deserved (Gienapp 1987; Silbey 1985). The standard story noted, but did not highlight, nor have much to say about, the findings of those who argued that the emerging Republicans had many roots in the nativist camp. In contrast to the sectional influence argument, those convinced by the findings of the strength of parties in the political life of the nation suggested the need to think about the era in a somewhat different way. They believed that sectional issues always had had some impact on national politics. But it was a contained impact. The national parties seriously constrained the growth of the sectional crisis for a longer period than usually acknowledged. Most political leaders did their utmost to meliorate whatever sectional tensions existed by continuing to offer a meaningful alternative and, to many, a more critical reason for not being overwhelmed by sectionalism as a political issue (Silbey 1967, 1985).

The pattern in the South underscores such claims. There was a more complex reality in the region’s politics than has usually been seen by those who focused on sectional tensions due to the arguments over slavery. It was not that sectionalism was absent or unimportant. Given the role of the slave economy there was much sensitivity about any threats to its continuance. But, whatever the presence of a slave society, it did not affect everyone in the same way. Within the South much of its politics mirrored that of the rest of the country. The two-party system was present and a vigorous factor in political life – with the exception of South Carolina – and was divided over policy issues that were the focus of such matters elsewhere. Even as southerners were largely united in defense of slavery, for a very long time their partisan differences immobilized those seeking sectional unity as a means of defending the institution (Oakes 1990; Watson 1990; Shade 1996). William Freehling’s nuanced analysis in the first volume of his The Road to Disunion (1990) emphasizes the difficulties of forging a common political stance. Southern unity was not successfully effected until quite late in the period.

In the North similar resistance existed to forging a sectional coalition against the South. Historians have identified the election of 1848 as the first clear opportunity to gauge the growing sectional strength at the national level. The presence of the Free Soil Party challenging the Whigs and Democrats suggested that the battle was the “harbinger” of what was to come (Alexander 1990; Rayback 1971), the destabilizing and breakdown of party political dominance; a recent close study of the election argues otherwise. When the results were in, the major parties’ strength, though challenged and to an extent affected by the election, continued to confound the sectionalists. Issues related to slavery and sectional tensions, while vigorously raised by some, did not as yet overcome the power of partisan commitment among most voters. Faced with
The political world of the antebellum presidents

angry outbursts, demands, and threats, the parties bent but held on effectively into the 1850s (Silbey 2009).

As a result of the challenges to the dominance of slavery and sectional divisions in American politics, contentious issues remain among scholars as to how and when the tide turned: when did sectional impulses break through the constraints present to become the central focus of American politics? Further, what was the relationship between party decline and sectional triumph, that is, the latter’s connection to the electoral realignment of the mid-fifties? Students of parties and popular voting agree with the standard interpretation that the years 1854–1856 were the key moments. Their differences are over whether, as usually argued, it was the culmination of a step-by-step steady aggregating series of confrontations, each adding more tension and more movement, accumulated tensions and confrontations that ultimately became impossible to contain, or, alternatively, given the strength of partisan commitment, it was the result of a sudden earthquake rooted in a major political uproar which at last deranged the normal processes and shattered the ability to contain the sectional genie (Gienapp 1987; Silbey 1985; Holt 1978).

The argument is that what happened in the mid-fifties was a two-step process involving growing partisan dysfunction and party weakening and then followed by the impact of much more powerful sectional confrontation than ever before. The point is that the partisan quality present in American politics cannot be readily dismissed too early or too completely until the parties fragmented, beginning with the nativist revolt that preceded a similar uprising over Kansas over slavery. The impact of the voter realignment rooted in ethnoreligious elements gone wild on the major parties created the conditions for other powerful pressures to change the direction of American politics. In 1854–1855, the nativists seriously hurt the old parties. In 1856, dramatic events, the war over slavery in Kansas, and violence in Congress shifted the dynamic decisively by underscoring more than ever before that there was an important and expanding sectional dynamic in American politics that was critically important.

William Gienapp’s exhaustive study of the emergence of the Republicans stressed the two-step process. The first was the collapse of the Whigs. Given the strength of the Know Nothings, the Republicans “waged a desperate and at first seemingly hopeless battle with the rival American party to replace the defunct Whig organization.” The Republicans were in “a precarious situation in the Spring of 1856” (Gienapp 1987: viii, 273). But the strife in Kansas between free state and slave state settlers culminating in the “sack” of the northern town of Lawrence, and the brutalizing of the fiery antislavery Senator Charles Sumner on the Senate floor by a southern congressman, had an immense impact. “The coincidental timing of these two events greatly magnified northern indignation” by focusing on and
bringing to a head what Republicans had been arguing, that a militant South was attempting to destroy any and all opposition to its expansionist demands (Gienapp 1987: 301). At that point, the sectional tensions became fully and effectively embedded in American national politics. Northern anger against the South tipped the balance. As Holt put it, “the intensity of northern anger at Slave Power aggressions and the aid it gave Republicans cannot be exaggerated. Northerners felt a profound need for a party that championed the North” (Holt 1999: 981). By the presidential election of 1860, the American landscape was twisted by the fracturing of the major parties into sectionally dominated combatants (Potter 1976).

The Republicans focused on anti-southernism as their main political weapon while still trying to retain the support of the nativists in the North. As Richard Carwardine has noted in his thorough study of evangelical Protestantism in American politics, “during the later 1850s, Republican support in many areas for nativist, especially anti-Catholic legislation (including voter registration and Sabbatarian laws, though rarely prohibition [of liquor]) fostered their image as an anti Romanist party. So, too, did their nominating known nativists for political office” (Carwardine 1993: 300). Republican leaders incorporated nativist tenets in their speeches and platforms, primarily at the local level. By 1860, the new party, with its several defining roots, had become strong enough to win national power in a four-party race. Traditional partisan forces continued to exist side by side with the rising sectionalism but it was clear that the latter now dominated the political world.

Challenges and Alternatives

The political historians who elaborated the centrality of the party system that emerged in the 1830s and its widespread influence in the political world stimulated but never fully dominated scholarly discourse. Nor did the description of ethnoreligious voting behavior as critically important in this era. Some scholars were unsettled, remained unconvinced by it, and, more critically, resisted the new narrative as it evolved (Fehrenbacher 1985). By the 1990s their resistance and the scholarly dueling that ensued about the nature and substance of American politics in this era reinforced the notion that no established organizing scholarly paradigm such as the post-progressive argument long remains without challenge.

Jacksonian Democracy had something of a rebirth in the works of Robert Remini and Sean Wilentz, who had little sympathy for the arguments offered against their notion of the class-based reality of the time, particularly about the suggestion of a more complex social interpretation of popular voting behavior shaped in significant degree by ethnoreligious forces.
Nor were they persuaded by the claim that Jackson and his followers were not leaders of an emerging democracy that came about due to the president’s initiatives and accomplishments. Andrew Jackson and his followers once more mounted the democratic pedestal. Both Remini and Wilentz revived class-based analyses, the latter incorporating material from the new social history’s focus on the activities and ideology of the lower ranges of society. Remini, in a well-researched, massive, and traditional three-volume biography of Jackson and in a series of further volumes about the era, argued that, in his view, whatever the apparent limitations of his actions, Jackson was a catalyst of democratic striving against the dominant elites in American society (Remini 1977, 1981, 1984). Wilentz agreed with Remini in even stronger terms, also arguing for Jackson and his followers as the progenitors of democratization who earned, as a result, the support of those at the lower reaches of society who were the beneficiaries of his policies (Wilentz 2005).

Charles Sellers codified this resurgence, strongly arguing in stark economic ideological terms that a market revolution was the main shaper of political discourse, activity, and behavior in the years after 1815, as Americans moved from an economy primarily dominated by small-scale production for local consumption to one organized into commercially centered larger units producing for distant markets. In Sellers’s telling, this market revolution split Americans between a precapitalist population of farmers and artisans who resisted the commercialization of the society and the resulting demands it placed on them. They preferred to maintain their local focus and ability to run their own lives against distant forces that they could not control. Sellers argued that their outlook set the democratic tone of the era that was incorporated in the Jacksonian movement in a battle against the entrepreneurial middle class, that is, the market-oriented groups dominating the Whig Party – and setting, thereby, “the class dynamics of two party politics” (Sellers 1991: 348). If there were ethnoreligious elements present, he argued, they were products of the class warfare underway and not separate elements independent of them.

Not unexpectedly, the neo-Jacksonian scholars were immediately challenged in their turn. Sellers’s book attracted much attention with panel discussions at professional meetings, extended review essays, and historiographic considerations brought together in volumes focused on the notion of the market revolution (Stokes and Conway 1996). Many critics accepted the idea of a market revolution as a useful way of thinking about the era but challenged what they thought were exaggerations and distortions. Perhaps the harshest comment was from William Gienapp, who suggested that Sellers’s discussion was “at times [a] bizarre interpretation of Jacksonian America” (Gienapp 1994: 233). As to the class dimension of popular voting, critics pointed out that the record seemed clear cut from the many
studies of the era’s electoral behavior. As David Reynolds reminded historians, “neither party was wholly the people’s party though the Democrats had seized the image” (Reynolds 2008: 319). When some scholars stressed that class-focused political divisions were particularly strong in the southern states, James Oakes responded that while “more than anywhere else in antebellum America, class differences virtually defined Southern political culture,” such division “was rarely neat and never absolute” (Oakes 1990: 124).

Revisions, challenges, and counterchallenges led to some scholarly convergence on central points. In their recent extended studies Michael Holt, Daniel Walker Howe, and Harry Watson each focused on the multiple elements present in American life, arguing that they interacted to affect political choice in the nation’s diverse society instead of there being an either/or situation pitting a single dominant force, such as class or ethnoreligious divisions, as the sole centerpiece of voter choice and party differences (Howe 2007; Holt 1999; Watson 2006). In a number of important books, particularly his painstaking examination of the rise and fall of the Whig Party, Holt suggested several revisions in the post-progressive narrative. He recognized that ethnoreligious elements were part of the voters’ decision-making calculus and the critical factors at certain points. But he suggested that “they were hardly a continuous or pervasive presence in national elections” (Holt 2001: 104).

He focused, instead, on economic conditions, both nationally and locally, as the primary influence on voting decisions. In the election of 1840, for example, he stressed the intense impact of the economic downturn that had begun in 1837 on how voters acted when they went to the polls that year. At the same time, he noted that “ethnic and religious tensions, indeed, sometimes offset the general economic pattern of partisan support” (Holt 1999: 83). He also traced those moments when ethnoreligious elements were critical in the interaction between partisan and sectional dynamics into a convincing understanding of the transformation of a partisan political nation into one characterized by the increasing dominance of sectionalism in the late fifties, including describing the important role of nativism in the shift (Holt 1999).

In contrast, Howe argued that in the 1840 election, the distinction between evangelicals and nonevangelicals proved particularly important, with evangelicals, regardless of class, voting Whig “as a way to enlist the power of the state on behalf of reform.” Further, he suggested that “contemporaries generally assumed men with greater income, education, and respectability were likely to vote. But there were innumerable exceptions to such social categories.” The key was that “evangelical religion interacted with economic development to polarize the population,” creating the basis for two broad partisan alliances (Howe 2007: 580, 578; 1991: 1228).
Harry Watson has also synthesized the current explanation of American political life in his influential work *Liberty and Power* (2006), arguing that “the party system then did not pit monolithic blocs of rich and poor citizens against each other.” He reaffirmed the notion that cultural and economic elements were present and closely intertwined as the parties settled down and their supporters came to the polls. He recognized the importance of ethnoreligious tensions in politics but argued that they were “very closely related to the socioeconomic transformation under way” (Watson 1990: 12, 176). In the second edition of his study of the era he reaffirmed his earlier conclusion that ethnoreligious tensions “affected the choices of Jacksonian voters but did not supplant such questions as equal rights or the Bank War. Among all groups the issues of cultural differences and class conflict were too deeply intertwined for us to say that religion or ethnicity by itself was more important than other matters” (Watson 2006: 233).

In each of these studies the conclusions were clear. It was never uniquely one divisive element or another that determined political outlook, commitment, and behavior. As one historian summed up the general perspective of these scholars: “the best reading of the evidence suggests that the American voting universe was fired by an eclectic mix of enduring confrontations rooted in past experience and as well as by aspects of the new socioeconomic forces coming into play” (Silbey 2001: 69).

Other critics beside the neo-Jacksonians found serious cracks in the partisan dominant narrative. Some stressed the presence of a persistent ideological force in American thought as a key element defining the political system and the behavior of its participants. They suggested that at the root of American values was a strong and widespread commitment to civic republicanism, an idea that went back to the Italian city states of the Renaissance (what one scholar has called the Machiavellian moment) that was deeply ingrained in American thought in the early republic (Pocock 1975). Proponents wanted the nation to live by the values of public virtue, private discipline, the setting aside personal interests for the public good, individual liberty, and balanced government. This civic republicanism should be defended against the corrupting influences of greed and the various sectarian actions to which American politics too often succumbed. They were particularly suspicious of the wiles of partisan leaders and the parties they led, who, they believed, engaged in manipulations that corrupted the political realm and the society at large in their own and their supporters’ interests whatever the larger needs of the society (Bailyn 1967; Shalhope 1972). Historians found evidence of such intense attitudes in many different places among many different people. Michael Holt argued the importance of such ideas among many Whigs who distrusted and feared the Democratic politicians and their intentions. Sean Wilentz found such
ideas important in defining and shaping the political world of New York City working men (Holt 1999; Wilentz 1984).

The frequent challenges to the main parties from third parties have led a number of scholars to raise questions about the claims that there was a persistent two-party dominance in this era. In a number of articles and a book, two social historians, Glenn Altschuler and Stuart Blumin, affirmed that there were continuing strong strains of ideological antipartyism throughout the era, that many Americans were not party loyalists, and that their interest in, and attention to, partisan politics was far less consuming than scholars had suggested. Mark Voss-Hubbard pointed to the frequent presence of third parties in presidential elections as similarly raising questions about the extent of two-party primacy in the so-called party period. Ronald Formisano also posited a comparable list of the range of matters that did not fit into the partisan dominant narrative. He has also reminded historians that a world existed outside the organized partisan system in the populist strain in nineteenth-century politics that frequently expressed much hostility, and resistance, to the organized political parties because of their subservience to the nation’s elites whatever their rhetoric (Altschuler and Blumin 2000; Formisano 2008; Voss-Hubbard 2002). In all of these studies the claim was that the parties may have been strong actors in American politics but much less so and more ephemeral in their command of the landscape than has been suggested – what Holt calls the “plasticity” in the system rather than its unchanging architecture (Holt 2001: 105).

As noted above, both the progressive and post-progressive historians agree on the weakness of the federal government as a force in this era. Despite that scholarly tradition, the question of national power has recently been revisited with a number of scholars, pursuing what has come to be labeled policy history, arguing that there was more vigor at the center of government than has usually been credited. In his study of the development of the nation’s post office system, Richard John offered a rich description of the federal government’s largest department and the extensive tasks in which it engaged. Among the latter was its distribution of political materials such as partisan newspapers and reprints of congressional speeches and other federal government publications, actions that contributed to knitting the political world together. Critically, its building of a national communications network fostered the push for the development and integration of a growing country (John 1995, 2004).

Brian Balogh has gone further, arguing that many political leaders endorsed a “development vision” of the nation’s future and worked hard to effect its achievement (Balogh 2009: 11). In such matters as creating territorial governments to manage distant areas, removing Indian tribes from them so that they could be developed, and financing some internal improvements to tie that nation together, they furthered their vision and
expanded the reach of the federal government. Beyond that direct intervention, the post office department called on private entities such as Wells Fargo to assist in delivering the mail, forging, in effect, a public-private partnership. Because their activities were, in Balogh’s phrase, largely “out of sight,” meaning that the lack of regulative institutions and force to compel acceptance were not as marked in people’s minds (or in those of later historians) than they might have been. Clearly, the federal government did not exert the kind of powers that became commonplace in the twentieth century. But in its time it had an important role and filled it well despite resistance and the limits set on its power (Balogh 2009).

When the question of the effect of sectional forces on American politics arises, the post-progressive revisionist suggestions have also not been universally accepted. The argument begins, as noted above, with the extent of the commitment to sectional impulses and when they became the dominant force in American politics. Critics of the “partisan imperative” argue that the notion rooted in the studies of parties and voters, that powerful partisan forces were in play for a longer period than the classic studies suggest, never fully weakened the importance of sectionalism as a deeply rooted fact of American political life. Recent literature has been emphatic in emphasizing the centrality of slavery, sectional differences, divisions, and tensions in shaping and directing American politics (Wood 2012).

Some tried to explain the alternative explanation away by downplaying the anti-immigrant, anti-Catholic, political surge in the 1850s, arguing that its impact was never as important as suggested. Those nativists who came into the Republican Party after 1854 had always been against slavery’s expansion and that proved more critical to them than the nativism that affected them for a brief time. Even if the original force of nativism was as powerful as argued, the critics suggest, by the late 1850s the intensity of sectional tensions clearly brought out their primary importance. They did not need the adoption of nativist planks by Republican state parties to accomplish their rise to dominance by 1860 (Cooper 1983; Anbinder 1992; Levine 2012).

Given the insistence on that perspective there has been renewed focus on slavery as the most important component of American politics from the Constitutional Convention through the first half of the nineteenth century with repeated flareups, confrontations, and compromises that favored the slavery interest. In the South, many scholars held to the belief that there was a world of widespread and powerful sectional ideologies and interests regardless of whether everyone in the region owned slaves or not that led to political unity trumping any partisan divisions even during the heyday of the nation’s two-party system (Cooper 1983). Kenneth Greenberg has argued that slavery “provided poor soil for party growth.” The traditional political culture of slavery sustained values and promoted behavior that
were incompatible with effective parties. They developed in the South but “did not possess a solid foundation” (Greenberg 1985: 46, 64). As another scholar summed up the literature on sectionalism in politics, “slavery dominated American politics from the Founding to the Civil War” (Williams 2011: 280). Others agree with the Republicans of the 1850s that the Democrats were always under the control of their southern wing and used that control in the section’s interest. Their party colleagues could be counted on to go along with their demands (Waldstreicher 2009; Richards 2000; Forbes 2007).

Several recent studies of the secession crisis reflect the ongoing scholarly differences about explaining that critical moment. William Freehling, after elaborating in the first volume of his study of the South’s road to disunion the difficulties that sectionalist leaders had in forging unity in a diverse, politically divided region, in his second volume, opening in 1854, he traces the southerners coming together at last against their sectional enemies given the imminent threat that they now saw to their society due to the changes in the political world and the rise of the Republican Party (Freehling 2007).

In his two-volume study of the coming of the Civil War, John Ashworth offers an equally sophisticated argument focusing on the political consequences of the existence of deeply rooted separate labor systems in the nation and southerners’ perception of the frightening weaknesses of slavery which posed a disruptive threat to their society. This led, in turn, to a confrontation over what to do. Once the Republicans emerged, the sectional genie was out of the bottle for good. Elizabeth Varon suggests that the persistent fear of disunion articulated in both politics and popular culture in the most extreme rhetoric was so pervasive that it tapped into deep fears about the nation’s fragility and created deep hostility between the competing sections that ultimately shut out any effective way to deal with events. Finally, Michael Holt argues that whatever the divisions between North and South, it was the political leaders’ manipulation of matters for short-term partisan gains that allowed the situation to deteriorate from sectional tension into sectional calamity (Ashworth 1983, 2007; Varon 2008; Holt 2004).

The American Political Nation in the Antebellum Years

As one considers the differences among scholars about the nature of American politics after 1837, the dominating reaction begins with the truism that historical descriptions are always subject to challenge, debate, and revision, before settling down into a particular narrative (Jacobs, Novak, and Zelizer 2003). In this process not all aspects of previous
perspectives are completely discarded. Many of the challenges to the current understanding also work within the post-progressive framework whatever their disagreements with aspects of it. The partisan system was never completely airtight. Sectional awareness and sectional tension were a continuing aspect of the nation and its political life. It was the rise of sectional pressures to new heights that complicated, and then overwhelmed, the partisan imperative but did not destroy it. What historians have referred to as the party period continued to have much vitality as it organized and sorted out the needs and desires of Americans (McCormick 1986; Silbey 2001). Despite those who refused to conform to it, party loyalty based on an intermix of factors shaped and dominated the American scene.

Some political historians, particularly those who have reexamined the role of government, have sought a different way of defining and understanding the period, focusing on the role played by the federal government at different moments (John 2004; Zelizer 2012). Still others have sought to expand the nature of what is political and focus on a range of relationships and experiences (Jacobs et al. 2003). At the end of the day, however, the balance of scholarship concerning political conflict and organization, that is the electoral dimension, agrees with the party period concept and its attendant explanation of voter commitment and choice. Until near the end of the era, the exceptions to the parties’ central role were anomalies. When Americans enthusiastically participated in politics, most did so as members of a political party. The point remains in weighing various factors in play that the strength of the party system and the range of factors that were its building blocks had a constraining impact on the sectional uproar – at least for a while – that is, until the mid-fifties, whatever the critical aggregation of tensions some scholars perceive as the key to the period. Then slavery began to have the kind of impact at the polls on election day that antislavery advocates had pushed for so long.

Disagreements and sharp controversies about antebellum politics remain. Still, what remains central is that, with few exceptions, the nation’s presidents and those with whom they worked clearly lived politically primarily in partisan times. They understood this and acted accordingly. Even those of them who had not risen through the party ranks largely ingested the dominant values. They could do no other. But even as partisan political animals they had to deal with a society that faced enormous difficulties and, ultimately, national derangement, from the force of sectionalism in both North and South whose advocates strongly challenged the partisan direction of American politics. The party system survived, as did its basic divisions, and resurge to dominance in the postwar era, now containing important elements rooted in the sectional conflict that were absorbed in the fire of the post-antebellum reunion of the nation.
References


**Further Reading**


**GUIDE TO FURTHER READING**

The works cited in this chapter and listed above are part of a vast literature focusing on America’s antebellum politics. In framing my argument I cited those studies that I believed shaped and illuminated the interpretive direction I wished to go. There are many other books and articles that could have been included and the fact that they were not is not intended to reflect on their quality and contribution. Those mentioned here complement those cited in the references and are samples of some of the most helpful of the larger literature.

