

The Democratic Experiment: New Directions in American Political History. Edited by Meg Jacobs, William J. Novak, and Julian E. Zelizer. xiv + 422 pp. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003. References, index. Cloth, \$65.00; paper, \$19.95. ISBN: cloth 0-691-11376-9; paper 0-691-11377-7.

Reviewed by Robin L. Einhorn

The central message of this essay collection is that U.S. political history is in good shape. *The Democratic Experiment* is framed as an answer to the laments of leading political historians in the 1990s that the field had been marginalized by social and cultural history. This verdict was never warranted. What declined was not “political history,” but the “new political history” of the 1970s—specifically, the statistical analysis of election returns. The editors cite “institutionalist” and “sociocultural” approaches, though most of the research in these essays is actually in the “institutionalist” mode. Most of the contributors are relatively young authors of first books (with reflections by James Kloppenberg and Ira Katznelson at the end), and most of the selections are extremely good: well-researched, intelligent, and persuasive.

The essays are arranged chronologically. Joanne B. Freeman “covers” the early republic by presenting the “honor culture” she explicates in her book *Affairs of Honor* (2001) as the key to the otherwise “unexplainable” Sedition Act of 1798. Yet this concept does better in the richer context of her book than it does here, where readers are thinking about the long term. Freeman describes a lost cultural world, in which “politicians gambled their reputations in an exposed arena that threatened widespread personal dishonor” (p. 31). This gloss seems to describe the world of Bill Clinton: “where

personal reputation and political authority were so intertwined, a character attack was a powerful weapon” (p. 30).

Two essays treat the antebellum era. William J. Novak demonstrates that the Fourteenth Amendment created American “citizenship.” He finds little consciousness of it earlier. When he does find references to citizenship, they are embedded in “the common law of membership” (p. 97), whereby citizenship rights arose from rights and duties tied to particular status categories rather than from universal rights and duties. Richard John, meanwhile, builds on his important book about the United States Post Office, *Spreading the News* (1995), to show that the growth of the federal bureaucracy in the 1820s made the Jacksonian movement possible. John’s essay is relentlessly brilliant. It revises conventional pictures of the Jacksonians by making new sense of the connections among electoral politics, public policy, and administrative development. Most readers will be struck by its key observation: “In the United States, no less than in France, Germany, or Great Britain, big government *preceded* big business” (p. 56, emphasis in original). The Jacksonians purposefully weakened the administrative apparatus, largely to protect slavery. A government that could deliver mail over a sprawling territory might have been able to orchestrate a peaceful abolition. Thus, “the Jackson administration supported policies that weakened the organizational capacities of the central government and protected the vested interests of the slaveholders who dominated its party’s political base” (p. 73).

Three essays treat the late nineteenth century from the perspectives of constitutionalism, class formation, and “family values.” Michael Vorenberg shows that the Civil War transformed ideas about amending the Constitution, in that Americans who

had been wary about tinkering with the founders' handiwork now began to propose amendments routinely: "The rediscovery of the amending device was one of the lasting innovations of the Civil War era" (p. 138). Vorenberg's essay ends on a democratizing note. Sven Beckert's study of the 1877 effort of New York City elites to disfranchise the propertyless at the municipal level is less optimistic. Beckert disputes the theoretical linkage between the existence of a bourgeois class and democracy. In New York, "it was workers and lower-middle-class citizens, not the city's economic elite, who fought for suffrage rights" (p. 166). Beckert is persuasive, though his use of "bourgeoisie" to mean "upper class" engages European theory more directly than American historiography, in which the bourgeoisie at issue is more often the "middle class" than the elite. Finally, Rebecca Edwards examines a range of partisan debates through the lens of "family values." From 1856 to 1896, she argues, Republicans acted on a domestic ideology, while Democrats opposed anything that threatened the power of men.

The essays on the early twentieth century all use the "institutionalist" strategy. Michael Willrich shows that the municipal courts of Chicago pioneered much of the welfare-state growth of the Progressive Era, including expanded administrative capacity, and Brian Balogh and Meg Jacobs stress the specificity of institutional timing. Balogh's study of interest groups, centering on the 1928 Hoover campaign, challenges the idea that they are "natural" features of democracy. The transfer of policy-related information between politicians and constituents, Balogh argues, depended mainly on parties before 1900, interest groups from 1900 to 1970, and opinion polling since 1970. Jacobs turns to a specific policy area, efforts to combat "the high cost of living." From the 1920s through World War II, public agencies enlisted grass-roots consumer groups to police

price hikes. With a consumption-driven analysis of economic growth, this consumer movement worked with the labor movement as well as the government, supporting wage hikes and price cuts as compatible strategies to increase “mass purchasing power.” Once these links broke down, consumer groups with narrower goals replaced the broad-based movements.

The late-twentieth-century section starts with a magnificent essay on antitax and antistate sentiments by Julian Zelizer. These phenomena must be understood on their own terms, Zelizer argues, rather than as mere covers for racism or corporate interests. Budget constraint has been a constant in policymaking, because Americans really have not wanted to pay taxes that were not targeted to specific programs. Thomas Sugrue follows by stressing the persistence of localism from the New Deal to the present, especially the local government roles in administering federal programs. Matthew Lassiter then examines a specific politics of localism: the class-conscious suburban populism that captured the “center” by voicing claims of “middle-class entitlement” (p. 329), portraying the de facto racial segregation of white suburbs and black inner cities as natural rather than the result of concrete public policies. This ideology, Lassiter argues, was much more important in realigning national politics than the overt racism featured in traditional “southern strategy” analyses.

James Kloppenberg and Ira Katznelson conclude the volume with programmatic essays. Kloppenberg urges historians to drop the ideological categories of “liberalism” and “republicanism” in order to focus instead on “the multidimensional and essentially contested concept of democracy” (p. 352). Katznelson urges comparative work and continued engagement with APD (American Political Development) scholars. Yet these

learned essays seem to miss a major lesson of the research essays that precede them. *The Democratic Experiment* is the manifesto of a generation in one sense. Decades of disastrous job markets have raised the bar in the history profession. Younger political historians will not rally around anyone else's research program. For this generation, to paraphrase Carl Becker, every historian is his—and her—own historian.

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