

The Forgotten Origins of the Northern Whigs, 1827-1833

Donald J. Ratcliffe

Edward D. Mansfield became renowned as an accomplished and highly literate spokesman for the Whig party in the Queen City of the West. Shortly after establishing himself in Cincinnati as a young lawyer, Mansfield expressed his understanding of the current political situation in a private letter:

It is perfectly evident [he wrote] that the lines of party are drawn over the whole U.S. In this state we have been moderate, but the fever is rising & I doubt not, that here as elsewhere, we shall have a bitter & heated contest, which may last many years & which will separate society as well as parties.

Mansfield was, of course, referring to the partisan contest that historians have come to call the Second American Party System, the great nationwide conflict between Whig and Democratic parties that dominated public life for twenty years in the antebellum period. By making non-sectional conflicts central to the nation's internal politics, that contest played a crucial role in mitigating the sectional tensions that otherwise seemed to press the nation toward secession and disintegration. Mansfield evidently appreciated just how deeply those non-sectional political passions would burn; the only problem with his statement is that he made it not at some point between 1833 and 1838—the period at which modern historians say the Second Party System started and true mass party politics began—but some years earlier, in October 1827.¹

If the Second Party System was central to the life of the time, if it was sustained by masses of committed identifiers among the astonishing numbers who regularly turned out to vote, then it matters hugely to understand what social, cultural, and economic divisions underlay this non-sectional cleavage among the American public. And in order to explain the underlying tensions and differences, it is essential to be clear *when* the political cleavage came into being. If you believe that the Whig party emerged in

the mid-1830s because of the constitutional crisis created by Jackson's reckless Bank War, or because of the religious revival of 1831 (in the case of Rochester, New York), or because of a "Country Party" reaction against excessive centralized party management, or because of local ethnocultural crises (as in Michigan), then it really is rather awkward to discover that the divisions supposedly generated by those crises had been in existence for several years before the crises occurred.²

The fashion of dating the start of a thoroughgoing, mass two-party contest from the mid or even late 1830s has, of course, much to commend it. Before 1834 most of the Southern states had been marked by a high level of internal political unity, as indicated by the overwhelming electoral victories won there by Andrew Jackson and his supporters from 1826 through 1832. Their popularity, and the weakness of Jackson's opponents, in most areas of the South, guaranteed that there would be no great pressure for intense party organization or excessive electioneering in much of the region.³ But in the northern states and the border states, by contrast, an opposition existed from an early date that produced a massive vote in 1828 for John Quincy Adams's re-election and in 1832 for Henry Clay. The threat of this anti-Jacksonian opposition galvanized the Jackson party to greater activity, to more thorough organization, to energetic canvassing—and yet this situation is almost never described as a real two-party contest. Indeed, the mere suggestion that the anti-Jacksonians or National Republicans may have helped to create a genuine, mass, national two-party competition is scornfully dismissed by most modern historians, though not always for the best of reasons. Michael Holt once remarked that he couldn't accept that the Whig party started before 1834, because in that case he would have had to add several extra chapters on to his recent thousand-page *magnum opus*!⁴

Holt seems on strong ground because most modern historians regard the anti-Jacksonians of 1827-33 as a political nonentity. After all, they didn't even have a consistent name, and took to calling themselves National Republicans only in 1830.⁵ In recent times historians have assumed that they were essentially old-fashioned elitists incapable of understanding or resisting the challenge of Jackson's Democracy. We are variously told that they were leader-oriented rather than voter-oriented, that they relied on voter deference to win elections, and had a deep antipathy to organized political parties.⁶ Their focus on national politics, we are assured, was of little interest to the voters, since Washington was "at a distance and out of mind" and the life of ordinary folk was influenced mainly by local and state government.⁷ The last dregs of a gentry-led political world, the anti-Jack-

sonians were to be overthrown not just by the Jacksonians but also by the Antimasons, whose populist appeals aroused common men unreached by the National Republicans and created a genuinely democratic enthusiasm that was ultimately transmitted into the Whig party.⁸ Thus it seems reasonable to doubt whether any sort of two-party system existed before 1834, and historians like William Shade and Joel Silbey have duly emphasized the transformation that came over American politics in the mid-1830s and established the so-called “party period” of American history.⁹

By contrast, the contention of this paper is that the Second Party System already had a real existence in the seven years before 1834, even if the South and some parts of New England showed little sign of internal division. In most of the North and the border states the opposition to Jackson represented a real political force, meeting all reasonable definitions of a modern mass political party. It was organized, populist, it electioneered, it expressed popular concerns, and its competition with the Jacksonians pushed both parties into impressive electoral efforts. When the Whig party appeared in those states in the mid-1830s, it simply maintained the established ways pioneered by the anti-Jacksonians and continued their national focus and national program. In effect, the Whig party in these regions represented nothing more than a change of name.

In making this case, I draw heavily on an older literature, on my own published studies of Ohio and of opposition politics throughout the Yankee-settled regions of the North,¹⁰ and on the press of these years in New Jersey and to some extent Maryland. In addition, the all-too-elusive voting returns of the years before 1836 provide overwhelming evidence that Mansfield was right in detecting the growth of two settled blocs of mass electoral opinion long before 1834. As others have noticed, at the state level the presidential election of 1832 correlates more highly with the election of 1828 (at +.93) than almost any other pair of adjacent presidential elections in the whole period from 1828 to 1964.¹¹ Similarly, some states show a high level of voter persistence at the county level from one presidential election to the next: in Ohio the county-level correlation was over +0.9, in New York about +0.8.¹² Historians of state politics in New Jersey, in the border states, and in Louisiana, have recognized that by 1828 two great voting blocs had been created that became the backbone of the later Whig and Democratic parties.¹³

In the case of the anti-Jacksonians, that voter support was not spread evenly around the country. But in twelve states stretching from Maine and Vermont to Maryland and Kentucky, the anti-Jacksonians represented a for-

midable body of votes, always carrying at least seven states and challenging closely in at least three others. Together, these twelve states elected 53 percent of congressmen and represented a clear majority in the Electoral College. The bedrock of the party clearly lay in the New England states, though its easy predominance through 1828 was soon challenged by Jacksonian Democrats in Maine and New Hampshire. It also enjoyed much support throughout the Middle States, which were always critical for its chances of nationwide success. In the most populous and powerful state, New York, the National Republicans were more formidable than most recent historians have allowed. The anti-Jacksonians generally thought that the second largest state, Pennsylvania, ought logically to be one of their strongholds, but it always eluded them by a wide margin and cannot be counted among the twelve competitive states. By contrast, Ohio has to be ranked among the great and decisive Middle States not only because of its maturity by the 1820s and its political weight as the fourth most populous state, but also because it was regarded as a key swing state by contemporaries. In addition, the anti-Jacksonians found extensive support in some parts of the South—in the border states, in sugar-growing Louisiana, and in Appalachia—but did disastrously in most of the older seaboard South, in the Cotton Kingdom, and on the farthest frontiers of Missouri and Illinois. This exclusion from much of the South explains why anti-Jacksonians found national success so elusive: the Jacksonians had so many more safe congressional seats, and so many assured Electoral College votes, that anti-Jacksonians had to win virtually all the marginal constituencies while the Jacksonian Democrats needed only a few of them for victory.

The anti-Jacksonians had built up their considerable bloc of votes by using all the devices of modern party organization, including arrangements for central direction from Washington. In March 1827, the Adams men in Congress named a three-man committee to plan the campaign to re-elect the president, which drew up lists of local activists, laid plans for what became the Harrisburg Convention, decided to strengthen the press in critical areas, and created, in the early months of 1828, a central campaign paper entitled *We The People*, which historians have strangely neglected. To sustain these efforts and support the press in critical areas, the committee levied “taxes” on Adams congressmen and on affluent supporters in their areas of strength.¹⁴ For the next presidential campaign, anti-Jacksonians called the first national convention ever designed exclusively as a nominating device, which met in December 1831 and duly produced the first keynote address, the first nominating speech, the first floor demonstration. At a follow-up national Young Man’s Convention in May 1832, the National Republicans

produced the first formally-issued party platform, which in effect laid down the principles upon which the Whig party would operate in the two decades after 1834.¹⁵

At the state level in 1828, the Adams men used formal nominating machinery in all seventeen states where they named a full list of Electoral College candidates. In twelve states they adopted the device of a state delegate convention to name their Electoral ticket and legitimize a state management committee. As James Chase has pointed out, a state delegate convention required activity and organization at the local level before it could take place, and was therefore a considerable incentive to early organization before an election.¹⁶ Similarly, in eleven states congressional elections were organized along national party lines by 1828, all of them among the twelve most competitive states. In 1828 Adams candidates for Congress were decided upon in some states through district delegate nominating conventions, while in 1832 Clay men adopted this device in ten states. Certainly in 1836 the new Whig party did not notably extend or deepen the organizational efforts previously used in the old National Republican states.¹⁷

The anti-Jacksonians extended these considerable organizational efforts to the local level and used them to approach the voters in populist fashion. Far from relying on deference, the Adams men in 1828 spread the mantle of popular approval over themselves: they described their tickets in seventeen states as the “People’s Ticket,” appealed to “working men,” and stressed that Southern Jacksonian leaders were often elitist in attitude and Southern policies hostile to the interests of Northern “laboring men.” In New York, the Working Men’s party of 1828-29 could be taken into the National Republican ranks by 1830 without much sense of contradiction.¹⁸

The anti-Jacksonians took their democratic appeals directly to the voters. In 1828 the Adams men more than matched the Jacksonians in the establishment of newspapers—gaining, for example, a 7:3 advantage in Ohio—and they produced scurrilous handbills and pamphlets capable of exciting “the attention of a neighbourhood.” The best-known handbills of 1828 were those published in Cincinnati by Charles Hammond, who damned Jackson not only for stealing another man’s wife, but also for having a prostitute mother and a Negro grandfather!¹⁹ In 1832 the National Republicans in eastern cities showed equal ingenuity in their innovative use of political cartoons as a campaign weapon.²⁰ Overall, they contributed almost as much as the Jacksonians to the agitation of public opinion in both presidential election years.

These efforts stimulated turnout until national elections were pulling out voters in greater crowds than state and local politics. In 1828, turnouts in the presidential election reached (though did not necessarily exceed) the sort of peak level that had been known earlier in state elections in all the competitive states outside New England. Within New England, the internal political unity of the late 1820s tended to keep turnout at low levels, but in Vermont and Connecticut turnout increased in the 1828 presidential election to levels twice the height of the state election of the same year. In the most competitive states elsewhere, presidential turnout leapt even more dramatically, overtaking that in state elections, as in Ohio. Moreover, these higher levels were reached before Antimasonry had made any real sort of impact on voter awareness. In some places that were later to become intensely Antimasonic, turnout in the presidential election of 1828 reached levels twenty percent higher than in any of the subsequent local elections in which Antimasonry was an issue!²¹ Who said that national contests of the 1820s were incapable of arousing popular participation?

So if we may think of the Northern anti-Jacksonians of 1827-33 as an effective party with mass support, as Whigs in all but name, how do we explain the cleavage of the electorate a decade earlier than recent historians have assumed? The answer is partly that the issues raised by Andrew Jackson were already well-perceived before 1828, even before his presidency sharpened them and the Bank war made them urgent. In an age well aware of how Napoleon had overthrown the French republic, Jackson was seen from the start as exactly the sort of charismatic military chieftain—pandering to mass adulation and unrestrained by well-groomed moral sense—who could pervert the presidency into an irresponsible monarchy.²² Similarly, doubts about Jackson's commitment to maintaining sensible national policies directed toward promoting the economic progress of the country already existed in 1828, especially among adherents of the American System, even if those doubts would extend much more widely after Jackson's removal of the government deposits from the Bank of the United States.

Beyond that, the new party divide drew largely on the severe sectional antagonisms generated by the coincidence of the Missouri crisis and the effects of the Panic of 1819. The critical election of 1824 was primarily a struggle for sectional power, and the bargain of 1825 brought Yankee sensibilities and the American System into conjunction against all who wished to avoid a threatening use of federal power. What modified that pattern were the internal conflicts within the North that made it possible for discontented and ambitious politicians to rouse popular support and lead it into the Jackson

camp. In part, these tensions within Northern society were ethnocultural, operating essentially on older ethnic groups, notably in Pennsylvania. In part they grew out of the old-party antagonisms, in places where the conflict between Federalist and Jeffersonian Republican continued into the 1820s. In part they arose from social conflicts exacerbated by the depression of the early 1820s. These tensions were not exactly the same as those operating in the mid-1830s, but inevitably reflected the changes in economic life generated by the Market Revolution. By the mid-1830s those tensions were powerful enough, in the context of Bank War and Panic and of the boom-bust experience of the middle and late 1830s, to overwhelm sectionalism and divide the South as it had never been divided before. But in the North those tensions only modified the political patterns already existing among an already aroused, divided, and committed electorate.²³

In conclusion, two points arise that are essential for understanding American political development. First, the vigor and popularity of the anti-Jacksonian cause demonstrates that the electorate was already by the 1820s (and indeed earlier) deeply aware of national politics. Established voter loyalties were disrupted in the 1820s, and new allegiances created, by the raising of national issues that differed from those of the First Party System. People were taking their political identities from national contests and even operating in local politics according to allegiances that had meaning only in national affairs. Though the depth of their commitment has been questioned recently by Glenn C. Altschuler and Stuart M. Blumin, yet from the point of those dependent on the electorate for power, the critical point was that so many voters went to considerable trouble to vote. Moreover, nearly half of them voted for a party that demanded the use of federal power to improve the strength and prosperity of the country. It is simply not true that somehow Washington lay “at a distance and out of mind” in the early republic, or that arguments over national politics were incapable of mobilizing the electorate in the 1820s.²⁴

Secondly and finally, we should dismiss from our minds the ancient presumption that “democracy” was an issue in the politics of the Jacksonian era. Though there were elitists around, the anti-Jacksonians had no monopoly of them, as the debates in the Virginia constitutional convention of 1829 demonstrated. Most older anti-Jacksonians had come to maturity during the First Party System when democratic political techniques had been developed and widely used, especially in New England and the Middle states. The presumption that the people should rule was shared by politicians on both sides, though great differences existed as to how popular rule should

operate, what dangers were to be feared, and to what uses it should be put. The anti-Jacksonians, far from fearing popular rule, looked forward to the supremacy of the popular will, unimpeded by the arbitrary interference of a willful, partial, and not necessarily intelligent executive power.

NOTES

1. E.D. Mansfield to his mother, Cincinnati, 15 Oct. 1827, E.D. Mansfield Papers, Ohio Historical Society. See also E[dward] D[earing] Mansfield, *Personal Memories, Social, Political, And Literary, 1803-1843* (Cincinnati: R. Clarke & Co., 1879).

2. Michael Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party: Jacksonian Politics and the Onset of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978); Ronald P. Formisano, "Political Character, Antipartyism, and the Second Party System," *American Quarterly* 21 (1969): 683-709, and *The Birth of Mass Political Parties: Michigan, 1827-1861* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971). For a notable exception that intrinsically accepts the continuity between the anti-Jacksonians of 1827-33 and the later Whig party, see Daniel Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

3. Charles S. Sydnor, *The Development of Southern Sectionalism, 1819-1848* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1948), 104-95, and William J. Cooper, Jr., *Liberty and Slavery: Southern Politics to 1860* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), 134-69.

4. Holt, "Comment," at annual conference of the Society for Historians of the Early American Republic, University of Cincinnati, 23 July 1995.

5. Samuel R. Gammon, Jr., *The Presidential Campaign of 1832* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1922), 155-62. The term had been used in 1828, but not regularly or exclusively; on some occasions it was used by the Jacksonians to describe themselves. The National Republicans do not earn more than one paragraph, let alone a chapter to themselves, in *History of U.S. Political Parties*, ed. Arthur M. Schlesinger (4 vols., New York: Chelsea House, 1973).

6. Lynn Marshall, "The Strange Stillbirth of the Whig Party," in *American Historical Review* 76 (1967): 425-44; Michael F. Holt, *Political Parties and American Political Development from the Age of Jackson to the Age of Lincoln* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 257; Harry L. Watson, *Liberty and Power: The Politics of Jacksonian America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990), 173; Formisano, "Political Character," 683-709. See also Thomas D. Brown, *Politics and Statesmanship: Essays on the American Whig Party* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 15-26.

7. James Sterling Young, *The Washington Community, 1800-1828* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), 13-37. Some historians have assumed that the failure of national party contests to structure competition at the state level in many states between 1828 and 1833 proves that real national "parties" did not exist at that time and that mass party loyalties could not therefore have been created then. See, for example, Paul Goodman, *Towards A Christian Republic: Antimasonry and the Great Transition in New England, 1826-1836* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 106, 114, 139, 151-52, 219. This, however, is

a regular feature of American politics at times when party support reflects strong sectional feeling between blocs of states.

8. Michael F. Holt, "The Antimasonic and Know-Nothing Parties," in *History of U.S. Political Parties*, ed. Schlesinger, 1: 575-620; Ronald P. Formisano, *The Transformation of Political Culture: Massachusetts, 1790s-1840s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981).

9. William G. Shade: "Political Pluralism and Party Development: the Creation of a Modern Party System, 1815-1852," in Paul Kleppner *et al.*, *The Evolution of American Electoral Systems* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1981); Joel Silbey, *The American Political Nation, 1838-1893* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 2, 7, 8, 16-23. See also R.P. Formisano, "Deferential-Participant Politics: The Early Republic's Political Culture, 1789-1840," in *American Political Science Review* 68 (1974): 473-87.

10. See the following studies by Donald J. Ratcliffe, *The Politics of Long Division: The Birth of the Second Party System in Ohio, 1818-1828* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2000), but also "The Market Revolution and Party Alignments in Ohio, 1828-1840," in *The Pursuit of Public Power: Political Culture in Ohio, 1787-1861*, ed. Jeffrey P. Brown and Andrew R. L. Cayton (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1994), 98-115, 209-14, and "Antimasonry and Partisanship in Greater New England, 1826-1836," *Journal of the Early Republic* 15 (1995): 197-237.

11. Gerald Pomper, "Classification of Presidential Elections," *Journal of Politics* 29 (August 1967): figure 2, Table 4. See also Shade, "Political Pluralism and Party Development," 83-88.

12. Donald J. Ratcliffe, "Politics in Jacksonian Ohio: Reflections on the Ethnocultural Interpretation," *Ohio History*, 88 (1979): 5-36; Lee Benson, Joel Silbey, and Phyllis Field, "Towards A Theory of Stability and Change in American Voting Patterns: New York State, 1792-1970," in *The History of American Electoral Behavior*, ed. Joel H. Silbey, Allan G. Bogue, and William H. Flanigan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 88.

13. Richard P. McCormick, *The Second American Party System: Party Formation in the Jacksonian Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1966); Charles Sellers, "Who Were The Southern Whigs?" *American Historical Review* 59 (1954): 335-46; Henry O. Robertson, "The Emergence of the Whig Party in Louisiana's Florida Parishes, 1834-1840," *Louisiana History* 33 (1992): 287, table on 309.

14. Ratcliffe, *Politics of Long Division*, 178-79, 191, 192. Robert V. Remini, *The Election of Andrew Jackson* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1963), 125-35, appreciates the press effort in 1828, though he misses *We The People*.

15. Glyndon G. Van Deusen, "The Whig Party," in *History of U.S. Political Parties*, ed. Schlesinger, 1: 333; for the text of the platform, see Gammon, *Presidential Election of 1832*, 168-69. The Antimasons held the first national convention shortly before the National Republicans in 1831, but this was designed to organize the party nationally, not to nominate a candidate.

16. James S. Chase, *Emergence of the Presidential Nominating Convention* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973), 84-93, 284-88.

17. Alvin W. Lynn, "Party Formation and Operation in the House of Representatives, 1824-1837" (Ph.D., Rutgers University, 1972), 43-44, 49. Nominating conventions were used by 1832 at the local and/or state level in all the states organized by National Republicans,

and were not to appear in the less competitive states (including Pennsylvania, Indiana, and Missouri) until after 1837.

18. Proceedings of Adams state delegate conventions of 1828, bound volume of pamphlets, Rare Book Room, Library of Congress; Ratcliffe, *Politics of Long Division*, 84-85, 140, 211-17, 228-32, 264-69; Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).

19. Ratcliffe, *Politics of Long Division*, 190-93 (quotation at 193); Remini, *Election of Jackson*, 77, 151-53.

20. Robert V. Remini, "Election of 1832," in *History of American Presidential Elections*, ed. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. and Fred L. Israel (4 vols., New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1971), 1: 513-14.

21. McCormick, "New Perspectives on Jacksonian Politics," *American Historical Review* 65 (1960): tables I and II; *History of American Presidential Elections*, ed. Schlesinger and Israel, 686-67; Ratcliffe, "Antimasonry and Partisanship": 204-08, and "Voter Turnout in Early Ohio," *Journal of the Early Republic* 7 (1987): 223-51, esp. 247.

22. Edwin A. Miles, "The Whig Party and the Menace of Caesar," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 27 (1968): 361-79; Ratcliffe, *Politics of Long Division*, 99-100, 145.

23. Donald J. Ratcliffe, "The Crisis of Commercialization: National Political Alignments and the Market Revolution, 1819-1844," in *The "Market Revolution" in America: Politics, Religion, and Society, 1800-1880*, ed. Melvyn Stokes and Stephen Conway (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1996), 177-201.

24. Glenn C. Altschuler and Stuart M. Blumin, *Rude Republic: Americans and their Politics in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000). These final two paragraphs draw also on Donald J. Ratcliffe, *Party Spirit in a Frontier Republic: Democratic Politics in Ohio, 1793-1821* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1998) for their view of the political.

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