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review of *Practicing Democracy: Popular Politics in the United States from the Constitution to the Civil War* ed by Daniel Peart and Adam I. P. Smith

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as well as its content. The emergence of the cultural/linguistic nation traced in Mattes's account may have actually undermined the idea of a common intellectual homeland—it may be that the common intellectual space contained the seeds of its own downfall and that this period represents the end, not the apex, of that space. Further exploration of this could have located the book as a seminal intervention on the transatlantic intellectual space. Nevertheless, the book holds much of interest for scholars of conservatism, the nation, democracy, and the early republic. It offers vital contextualization of political thought in the early republic and the development of American democracy. For scholars of the latter areas it is an important text that will have to be taken account of.

Simon Gilhooley, *Bard College*

Daniel Peart and Adam I. P. Smith, eds. *Practicing Democracy: Popular Politics in the United States from the Constitution to the Civil War*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015. Pp. 296. \$49.50.

The United States Constitution was drafted by men who feared and distrusted political parties. Yet in the 1790s these same framers took the lead in creating national parties, which in turn became engines of democratization—a development about which those framers were ambivalent. By the 1840s the Democratic and Whig Parties enjoyed a broad national following among ordinary voters. Martin van Buren, among others, praised parties as forces for sectional concord in a nation otherwise divided over slavery and other regional interests. Yet by the late 1850s American voters, disgusted with the political establishment, had killed the Whig Party, fatally divided the Democratic Party, and voted in large numbers for temperance, nativist, antislavery, and proslavery candidates. And then the war came.

Like the early Americans they study, the editors and contributors to *Practicing Democracy* appear ambivalent about political parties. The essays in the volume are diverse in theme and intellectual approach. What unites them is common opposition to what the editors label the “oft-repeated narrative,” represented, among others, by Arthur Schlesinger, Walter Dean Burnham, and Joel Silbey, according to which party competition expands democracy by expanding electoral participation—that, in short, “party virtually equals democracy” (2, 8).

The contributors to the volume do not dispute that organized party competition increased voter turnout. But they challenge in various ways the notion that expanded turnout among legally eligible voters is a good indicator of the

degree to which the American polity was democratic. What matters most, according to Johann N. Neem, is “the actual *capabilities* of ordinary citizens to affect outcomes. . . . The more able citizens are to influence outcomes, the more democratic the society” (247–48).

In this respect, organized party competition enhanced democracy in some ways and suppressed it in others. During the Jacksonian era, the two major parties expanded electoral participation by means of “powerful, regimented partisan organizations” that “developed sophisticated means to silence dissent within their ranks” (65). Rule by party wire-pullers does little to empower ordinary citizens. But the parties’ capacity to control voters was not unlimited. The creation and ultimate survival of the Democratic and Whig Parties depended on their remaining responsive to issues voters genuinely cared about. In building an Illinois Whig Party in the 1830s, for instance, Abraham Lincoln could not count on strong party attachments but instead emphasized farmers’ access to credit, “an eminently practical yet profoundly important concern” (154). When the major parties suppressed issues of urgent concern to millions of voters, as they did after the Compromise of 1850, voters abandoned the parties.

Contributors to the volume also emphasize the degree to which Americans who did not possess voting rights, and who therefore had to pressure political parties from the outside, were often able to shape political outcomes (63–64, 232–33, 251–61). The most dramatic example is the enormous impact of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, which was published in installments in 1851–52 and soon became the best-selling book in American history. John L. Brooke observes that political historians have often argued that “the northern public was apathetic about slavery in the years immediately following the Compromise of 1850” (73), only to be aroused from their slumber in 1854 by the shock of the Kansas–Nebraska Act. Brooke argues that the Kansas–Nebraska Act triggered a political earthquake only because “the northern public had been *prepared* for this moment by a series of events and experiences that fall outside the purview of routine politics” (79). The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850—a central theme of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*—transformed slavery into “a direct and palpable experience for northern whites” and gave rise to an enormous sentimental literature sympathetic to the plight of slaves (81–86).

In emphasizing the impact of cultural transformations originating outside the established parties, the contributors to the volume wisely do not minimize the importance of political parties and electoral politics. Instead, Neem observes, “parties offered activists a model of how to move from reform into politics. . . . The best evidence we have that the reformers were effective is that the political system *did* respond” (261–62). Moreover, Neem acknowledges, “without parties, the will of the people would be too diffuse to gain clear expression, and voters would be rendered powerless” (264). In this respect the contribu-

tors to the volume agree with the “oft-repeated narrative” about the connection between parties and democracy.

Nor does the volume present cultural interventions into politics in a universally positive light. Tyler Ambinder’s chapter on “Immigrants and Popular Politics in Pre–Civil War New York” reminds one of Martin Scorsese’s film *Gangs of New York*. Irish immigrants effectively controlled New York City politics by, among other tactics, joining volunteer fire companies, one of whose duties was to put out political fires by packing political meetings and polling places and forcibly ejecting dissenters (201–4).

The contributors to the volume challenge not only the substance of the parties-entail-democracy thesis but also the chronology of that narrative. Simplifying somewhat, the received narrative (which the authors here associate with Arthur Schlesinger) is that politics during the founding era was a gentleman’s occupation, infused with some popular ferment during the 1790s, then sinking into low-participation torpor by 1820. But beginning in 1828, the story goes, Andrew Jackson appealed to the common man, attacked the national bank, polarized the electorate, spawned mass political parties, and ushered in the age of (white male) egalitarian democracy.

The volume acknowledges that in many states popular apathy reigned in the early 1820s after the disappearance of party competition; in Richmond, Virginia, the state capital, only 17 votes were cast in the 1820 presidential election, and nationwide only about 10% of eligible voters turned out. But in 1824 in Illinois, where party competition was likewise absent, 83% of the electorate turned out for a referendum in which a proposal to make Illinois a slave state was decisively defeated. Thus, critically important issues could turn out voters with or without organized parties (130–38). In Virginia voter turnout was higher in the late 1790s, during the contest over the Alien and Sedition Acts, than it ever became during the Jacksonian era (106). Though organized two-party competition and extensive popular mobilization did not become a national phenomenon before the late 1830s, in some places it appeared much earlier (46–47).

This excellent volume does include some occasional false notes. Douglas Bradburn speaks inaccurately of James Madison’s “desire to organize a majority faction in opposition to Hamilton” (32). Madison did not view himself as organizing a faction, even if his critics charged him with doing so. Madison distinguished between just and unjust majorities; he called only the latter a faction. Alexander Hamilton, reflecting on the weaknesses of the Constitution, referred to his efforts to prop up a “frail and worthless fabric” (Alexander Hamilton to Gouverneur Morris, February 1802, in *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, ed. Harold Syrett [New York: Columbia University Press, 1977], 25:544); he did not call the Constitution a “frail and worthless document,” as incorrectly quoted here (29).

But the volume as a whole is well written, richly detailed, interesting to read, and more thematically coherent than most edited volumes. The authors and editors never lose focus on the following questions: Why should we care whether parties are strong or weak, or whether electoral participation rises or falls? How are such indicators connected with the capacity of ordinary citizens to shape political life? Do political parties bind a nation together or deepen its divides? Those are key questions for understanding antebellum American political history. They remain important questions today.

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Gary Gerstle. *Liberty and Coercion: The Paradox of American Government, from the Founding to the Present*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015. Pp 492. \$35.00.

Gary Gerstle's compelling new book is about political improvisation. It tells the story of how the United States managed to extend its "laws, institutions, and sovereignty across a vast continent" even though unable to rely on "a large centralized state" (345). The small government grew, we learn, by way of subtle forms of creative and imaginative politics.

Gerstle's journey begins with the federation of the late 1780s, when the republic embraced a liberal Constitution and instituted a central power, but one so "internally fragmented among three different branches of government" as to guarantee that "no single person, clique, or agency in the central state would ever be able to accumulate the sort of control" gathered by George III in Britain (21). American liberalism was, after all, no simple copy of its European counterpart. Even before the Revolution broke out, Gerstle argues, Americans had gradually come to ground 'membership' in their polity on residence and free will rather than on birth or descent in order to construct the "notion of a republic by consent" (30–32). This was new enough. But Americans were also filled with nostalgia for a republican ideal on the model of ancient Rome and had enjoyed a long history of local autonomy, which convinced them that the republican model could be successfully practiced. Indeed, since the earliest colonial days, local assemblies had acted as sovereign entities informally exercising the royal prerogative, which implied "the due regulation and domestic order" of their states (59–60). And so the quasi-sovereign attributes of the former colonies created a suitable environment for the pursuit of the republican dream of a polity empowered to ensure the 'common good'.