

The Idea of Democracy in the Early Republic

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[This is very much a sketch for an article that I hope to get around to writing in the next few months. Close enough to elections and voting for schmoozing, I hope.]

There has been a longstanding fascination, in both scholarly and popular circles, with views on democracy in the early republic. The two communities who participate in such conversations are no doubt intertwined, with scholarly interest in early ideas on democracy being motivated by contemporary political concerns and popular views on the topic being influenced by scholarly findings. In the Progressive Era, historians often portrayed the Federalists who led the constitutional (re)foundings in 1787 as Bourbons resisting the democratic tide unleashed with the American Revolution in 1776. Vernon Parrington thought that the Confederation period marked by the “skillful propaganda” of aristocratic property holders to identify democracy with “mob rule.”² J. Allen Smith concluded simply that “democracy” was “the very thing which [the constitutional founders] wished to avoid.”³ In their classic synthesis, Charles and Mary Beard cast these early years as a conflict between “Populism and Reaction.” Many members of the Philadelphia Convention seemed to be “frightened by this specter of democracy,” and they were more resolved to “restrain the masses” than to “appeal to the gallery.”⁴

At midcentury, students of founding thought backed away from these Progressive characterizations. The political scientist Martin Diamond took the Progressives to task for being anachronistic in their own thinking about democracy and the founding. Democracy and republicanism were simply “two species” of the one genus of popular government, with the former describing the form with popular assemblies and the latter describing the form with popular elections.⁵ The conservative writer Russell Kirk distanced himself from the sharp critiques of democracy that he saw in the iconoclastic Fisher Ames and instead embraced John Adams, who, Kirk claimed, successfully domesticated democracy. French radicals misunderstood the true character of democracy; American conservatives like Adams resisted only a “pure democracy” while embracing a democracy tempered by a natural aristocracy and balance of powers.⁶ In his study of American conservatism, Clinton Rossiter

¹ My thanks to John Dilulio for research assistance on this project.

² Vernon L. Parrington, *Main Currents in American Thought*, vol. 1 (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1927), 29.

³ J. Allen Smith, *The Spirit of American Government* (New York: Macmillan, 1907), 29-30.

⁴ Charles A. Beard and Mary R. Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization*, 1 vol. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1930), 311, 325.

⁵ Martin Diamond, “Democracy and *The Federalist*: A Reconsideration of the Framers’ Intent,” *American Political Science Review* 53 (1959): 54 (emphasis omitted).

⁶ Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind, from Burke to Santayana* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1953), 93-95.

insisted that the “American tradition has room for one form of government – democracy,” which in turn was understood to be “political democracy” or “constitutionalism.”⁷ The American founders were, and saw themselves as being, conservative democrats, not reactionaries. Richard Hofstadter sounded a more cautious note about the “antidemocratic position of the Constitution-makers,” focusing on their perception of the tensions between liberty and democracy. He concluded that the realism of “the Fathers” led them to be “moderate republicans,” but not democrats who would have endorsed direct popular rule.⁸

Some contemporary observers have again drifted toward Progressive era dichotomies. Citing figures ranging from Benjamin Franklin to James Madison, some modern conservatives have embraced the idea that the founders sought to establish a republic, not a democracy. Resurrecting a John Birch Society slogan (“This is a republic, not a democracy – let’s keep it that way!”), some conservatives now celebrate Charles Beard for his description of founding-era thought while reversing his normative preferences. At the dawn of the Kennedy administration, Robert Welch, of Birch Society fame, had himself argued that “republic” and “democracy” were more nearly antonyms than synonyms, and had been understood as such by early Americans.⁹ Former presidential aspirant Patrick Buchanan took the second Bush administration to task for “democracy-worship” and a failure to appreciate the more tempered (and less populist) virtues of a republic.¹⁰ The conservative writers of the Madison Project, for example, insist that it is a mistake to characterize the United States as a “democracy,” when the founders were instead seeking to establish a “constitutional republic.”¹¹ In the 1960s, the semantic dispute over republics and democracies was fodder for arguments over the Great Society.¹² In the twenty-first century, contesting the coupling of republics and democracies helps provide the philosophical foundation for objecting to idealistic adventurism abroad and expanded social welfare programs at home.

⁷ Clinton Rossiter, *Conservatism in America* (New York: Vintage, 1962), 72, 75.

⁸ Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition, and the Men Who Made It* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), 18, 15.

⁹ Robert Welch, “Republics and Democracies,” *The American Conservative* (May 14, 2013) (<http://www.thenewamerican.com/culture/history/item/15370-republics-and-democracies>, last visited 2/11/2014).

¹⁰ Patrick J. Buchanan, “A Republic, Not a Democracy,” *The American Conservative* (March 28, 2005) (<http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/a-republic-not-a-democracy/>, last visited 2/11/2014).

¹¹ Daniel Horowitz, “We the People: A Constitutional Republic, Not a Democracy,” *Madison Project* (September 18, 2013) (<http://madisonproject.com/2013/09/we-the-people-a-constitutional-republic-not-a-democracy/>, last visited 2/11/2014).

¹² Students for a Democratic Society leader Tom Hayden accepted Robert Welsh’s description of the United States, but where Welsh wanted to keep the republic Hayden wanted to usher in a “genuine democracy.” James Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 151.

The systematic scholarly literature examining the relationship between the concepts of “democracy” and “republic” in the late eighteenth century grew with the increased interest in political ideology in the historiography of the revolutionary and founding eras. Roy Lokken tried to cut through some of the disagreement over whether the revolutionary United States was democratic by focusing attention on how colonial America understood “democracy.”¹³ Although democracy may be an essentially contested concept in modern discourse,¹⁴ Lokken contended that there was “little controversy over the meaning of the term” in the revolutionary era.¹⁵ The revolutionary generation had in mind an Athenian city-state run by popular assemblies when they spoke of “democracy,” not the kind of popular governments that might (or should) exist in the United States. Robert Shoemaker, by contrast, concluded that the distinction between republics and democracies in the late eighteenth century was “quite hazy” at best but that both were regarded as desirable forms of government with republics perhaps emphasizing representation and separation of powers to a greater degree than democracies.¹⁶ Willi Paul Adams took a different angle, examining the conceptualization of “republican” specifically and concluding that republicanism was a “smear word” in the colonial period and only switched valence with the launch of the Revolution.¹⁷ Both before and after the Revolution, according to Adams, republic and democracy were almost always used as synonyms.¹⁸ Only with the ratification debates of 1787 were the two words distinguished to refer to distinct concepts, with the Federalists advocating republicanism as against democracy.¹⁹

The view that democracy and republic were interchangeable terms until the Federalists sought to distance themselves from democratic government and associate themselves specifically with

¹³ See, for example, J.R. Pole, “Historians and the Problem of Early American Democracy,” *American Historical Review* 67 (1962): 626; Richard Buel, Jr., “Democracy and the American Revolution: A Frame of Reference,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 21 (1964): 165. More recent work has been less interested in ideas of democracy in this period than with ideas of liberalism; see, e.g., Robert E. Shalhope, “Republicanism, Liberalism, and Democracy: Political Culture in the Early Republic,” *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 102 (1992): 99.

¹⁴ Sanford Levinson, *Our Undemocratic Constitution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 6.

¹⁵ Roy N. Lokken, “The Concept of Democracy in Colonial Political Thought,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 16 (1959): 570.

¹⁶ Robert W. Shoemaker, “‘Democracy’ and ‘Republic’ as Understood in Late Eighteenth-Century America,” *American Speech* 41 (1966): 94. Shoemaker also suggests the intriguing feature of some writers that places republicanism and democracy on different dimensions, with *res publica* associated with governments that aim for the public good regardless of their form and mechanisms of decisionmaking.

¹⁷ W. Paul Adams, “Republicanism in Political Rhetoric Before 1776,” *Political Science Quarterly* 85 (1970): 397.

¹⁸ Willi Paul Adams, *The First American Constitutions* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 106-109.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 110.

republican government is now common in the literature.²⁰ John Adams and James Madison have been portrayed as idiosyncratic outliers, attempting to introduce distinctions that few others recognized or adopted. Both democracies and republics took on a positive connotation for those who had made the Revolution, and Ben Franklin could have just as easily have announced that the Philadelphia Convention had given birth to a democracy as to a republic.²¹ The effort to distinguish the two and suggest that the founding generation sought to constitute “a republic, not a democracy” is dismissed as a “pseudo-learned argument” and an amply refuted “canard.”²²

The examination of the standing of the idea of democracy in the first years of the republic has often turned to the brand names of American political thought. The speeches and writings of John Adams, James Madison, James Wilson, and Alexander Hamilton loom large. Even Paul Adams’ more wide-ranging analysis relies heavily on the ratification debates.

In order to take a fresh perspective on this argument, this paper focuses on popular usage as reflected in period newspapers rather than the language of particularly seminal founding figures. Although works by Tom Paine and James Madison are incidentally reflected in the published writings of the newspapers, they are not given pride of place over more ordinary, often anonymous writers participating in the public debates of the time and making use of conventional linguistic formulas. The paper takes as its central source a sample drawn from a large, national collection of American newspapers contained in the electronic archive, “Early American Newspapers.” The sample drew from every fifth article using variations of the words “democracy” or “republic” between the years 1776 and 1800 (excluding reprints of previously coded articles). The result is a dataset of just over 1800 articles mentioning “republic” and over 800 mentioning “democracy” (the two sets are not mutually exclusive). The samples reflect the distribution of the usage of the terms across time, with variations of republic being used more often and both growing in frequency of their appearance across the late 1780s and 1790s. Although this approach cannot shed light on the claim that these terms had a primarily negative valence before Tom Paine’s call for a break from the British monarchy, it can tell us about the usage of these terms in the tumultuous years between the American declaration of independence from British colonialism through various episodes of constitution-making and through the early partisan splits between the Federalists and the Jeffersonians. Significant to American thinking about popular

²⁰ See, e.g., Robert A. Dahl, *How Democratic is the American Constitution?* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 179-183; Charles R. Kesler, “The Founders’ Views,” in *Democracy – How Direct?*, ed. Elliott Abrams (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002); Akhil Reed Amar, *America’s Constitution* (New York: Random House, 2005), 509.

²¹ The choice of terms in the Franklin anecdote has often been taken as particularly telling (“A republic, if you can keep it.”).

²² Adams, 114; Amar, 509.

government during this period was not only the establishment of home rule after colonialism and the struggles over the initial domestic political systems, but also the fallout from the French Revolution of 1789 and rise of a partisan opposition to the incumbent administration in the nation's capital.

This data reveals the need for some reassessment of the current scholarly consensus. For current purposes, I'm going to skip the qualitative analysis of the material and just highlight some of the broader patterns. Variations of the word "republic" appeared more often in the press in these early years of the nation's existence than did variations of the word "democracy," but the ways in which they were used are informative. As Adams found, this data indicates that when democracy and republic were specifically related to one another, they were frequently regarded as synonyms. But as the 1790s progressed, there was a growing undercurrent of dissent, as writers distinguished between democracies and republics and distanced themselves from the view that they were interchangeable.

As Figure 1 illustrates, republicanism was often used in a context that made it clear that a "republic" was descriptive of American government. While "democracy" could also be used to describe the form of government found in the United States (as visible in Figure 2), it was used that way less often. Democracy was, however, often used as a generic term to describe popular governments. Contrary to Madison's effort to distinguish republics from democracy by reference to use of elections and representative institutions, common usage in the newspapers did not make that distinction and instead often tended to associate democracies with representative institutions. Both terms appeared frequently in the 1770s and 1780s, but in the 1790s as Americans reacted to the excesses of the French Revolution and Democratic-Republican societies formed to critique the Washington administration their use increased. As usage increased in the 1790s, republic was used even more often to describe the American governments while democracy became increasingly associated with generic popular government.

Figure 3 indicates the different valence that the two terms tended to have for early Americans. A substantial portion of the usage of these terms was neutral, but a great many articles did tend to characterize democracies and republics in either positive or negative terms. "Republic" was overwhelmingly used as a term of favor in the years after the Revolution (the spike in negative usage in the 1770s simply reflects the small sample in those years). As one might expect for a word that was often explicitly associated with the American form of government, "republic" was not a smear word. It was a term of praise. "Democracy" did not enjoy the same unalloyed favorable usage. Democracies were as likely to be described negatively as positively, and the proportion of negative usage of the term actually increased in the 1790s. Adams contended that the Federalists had made a particular effort to

distinguish democracies from republics in the ratification debates, and had sought to cast the former into a negative light in order to help separate the proposed U.S. Constitution from the state and federal constitutions of the Confederation period. This evidence suggests that any such efforts had a negligible effect on popular usage. The real shift in attitude about democracies was not in the 1780s but in the 1790s, when the volume of normative uses of the terms increased dramatically and “democracy” was often used as a pejorative.

Contrary to the now conventional narrative, “republic” and “democracy” do not seem to have been essentially interchangeable terms in the early republic. Writers did not widely adopt Madison’s favored distinction between them, but they did systematically use the terms in distinct ways. The American governments were routinely associated with the more normatively desirable republicanism and rarely characterized as democratic. The idea of democracy proved to be much more controversial than the idea of republicanism, and became more so over time.

Figure 1: Percentage usage of “republic” as describing American, popular, or representative government

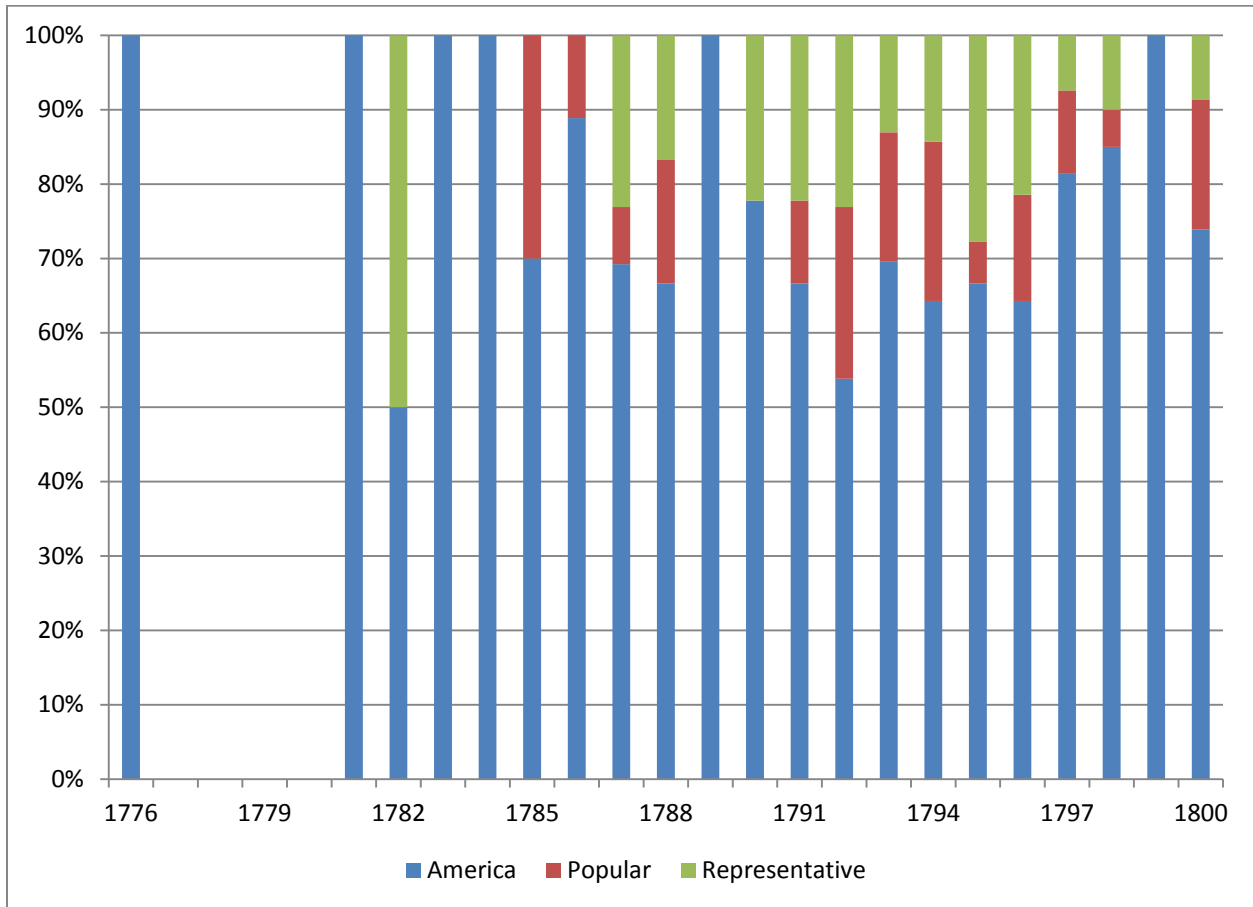


Figure 2: Percentage usage of “democracy” as describing American, popular, or representative government

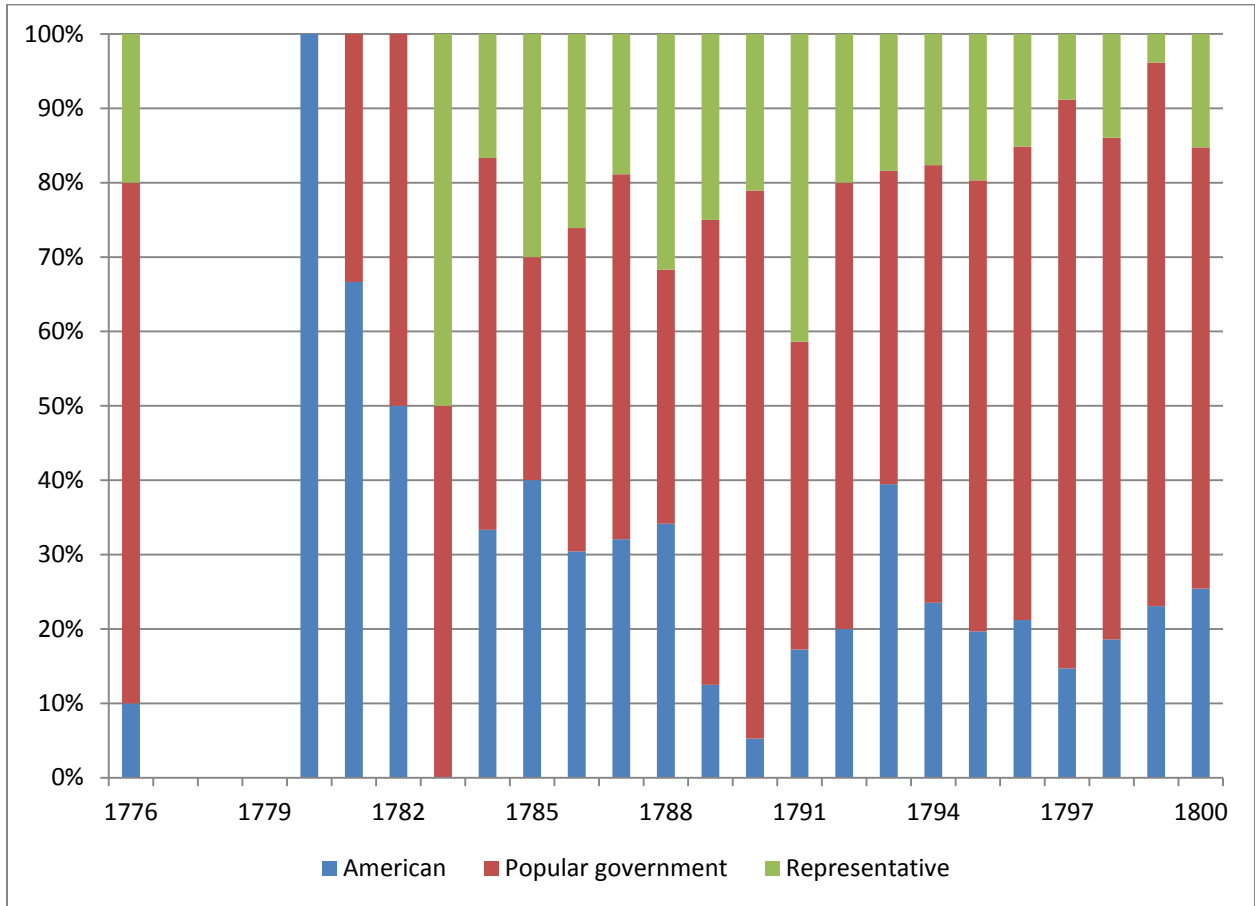


Figure 3: Proportion Usage of "Republic" and "Democracy" That Had Negative Connotation

