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The Civic "World We Have Lost:" Reflections on the First Generations of Democratic Self-Rule in America

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Despite many qualifications, the view still largely holds among American historians that a new and more democratic political culture, and a novel set of vibrant, mass-based political institutions and practices, were fashioned during the second quarter of the nineteenth century. The American Revolution had in several ways laid the groundwork for this remarkable development (not least in the replacement of monarchy with a republic), but it took a half-century or so before what Edmund Morgan has described as an "invitation" to struggle for equality was fully taken up in the political sphere.[1] Why it should have taken so long is addressed in fairly standard terms in the early chapters of Michael Schudson's The Good Citizen. Echoing Gordon Wood, Ronald Formisano, and others, Schudson writes of the embeddedness of deferential political traditions—of the customary dominance of local men of wealth and social standing in the organization and conduct of political affairs—and of the understandable difficulty in achieving so fundamental a shift from deference to participatory democracy.[2] Schudson, to be sure, might have paid closer heed to the increasingly feisty popular politics of the colonial era described by Gary Nash and, more recently, by Michael Zuckerman, who indeed believes that we have vastly overstated the force of aristocratic traditions in eighteenth-century America, and who proposes that we consign the concept of deference to the historical dustbin.[3] What would happen to Schudson's narrative, and, more profoundly, to our general understanding of the Age of the Common Man, if Zuckerman should be correct? I, for one, am not quite ready to accept Zuckerman's suggestion, and I believe Schudson's brief discussion of the transition to partisan democracy is essentially sound. Something significant was happening in American political relations in the Jacksonian era and, more to Schudson's point, to the very concept and practice of American citizenship.

But what, exactly, was happening? How shall we understand this transition, which seems so crucial to the establishment of enduring notions of American democracy, and, I would add, enduring partisan institutions devoted at least nominally to carrying that democracy into effect? I have already suggested that there is a customary view, and that this view is essentially that of the conjoined and mutually reinforcing triumphs of participatory democracy and the political party. It is based on powerful, seemingly incontrovertible evidence: of very large and sustained increases in voting among a newly enlarged white male electorate (turnouts of well under half of the qualifying electorate in pre-Jacksonian presidential elections rising suddenly to 57% in 1828, 1832, and 1836, and to a stunning 80% in 1840, hundreds of thousands of votes suddenly becoming millions); of enduring partisan organizations reaching down to the grass roots in new and seemingly democratic ways by means of local nominating caucuses and conventions, campaign clubs, and town and county committees; of spectacular campaigns, drawing masses of people, including those still excluded from the electorate, to parades and rallies suffused with emblems of popular commitment and democratic self-rule; of a rapidly proliferating, locally based partisan press, which brought political information and exhortation to private citizens in a manner that enhanced their independence from old-fashioned networks of patronage and clientage. This new pattern of politics took only a decade or so, perhaps even less, to crystallize—from, say, the first national party conventions of 1831 and 1832 to the rousing “Tippecanoe” campaign of 1840. In that brief time a distinctly American democracy was born, giving genuine expression to the collective egalitarianism and individual striving of masses of ordinary people, republican revolutionaries, empowered at last.

In The Good Citizen, Schudson recapitulates this narrative to a considerable degree (but not, as I will point out, without important qualifying insights). The final paragraph of his chapter on "The Democratic Transition in American Political Life" is a nearly unalloyed affirmation of the era's "growing egalitarian spirit, majoritarian institutions, including the state constitutional conventions that delivered them, the proliferation of both profit and nonprofit associations in building a bustling public arena, and most of all the political parties. . . . The party system," he continues, " built the highest level of citizen participation in electoral politics in our history. . . . The creation of the modern political party as a mass-based endeavor with a permanent organization that both mobilized popular participation and evoked strong mass allegiance was a boon to democratic politics." And in anticipation of the next and sadder chapter in American political history—what others have called "the decline of popular politics"—he concludes: "Ironically, before the end of the century [the political party] would be reviled as the chief barrier to a democracy authentically committed to the public interest."[4]

That irony is nicely observed. But should it be found only in the temporal regress of American democracy—in the post-Civil War transition from a golden to a gilded age? Schudson himself gives us a glimpse of ironies in the golden age itself, not least in his brief but highly pointed discussion of two of its most important icons, Tocqueville's Democracy in America, and the Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858. The latter are delightfully demystified with a short list of inconvenient truths about what actually happened at Ottawa and other Illinois towns: the debaters spent much of their time in ad hominem attacks and clever maneuvers; the thousands who gathered to hear them (and only a few could actually hear the speakers' words) spent much of theirs in cheering, laughing, and shouting; the debates themselves were exceptional, not typical, events in a political system that rarely pitted rival candidates or partisan ideologues against one another for the exchange of either insults or ideas. The debates "did not depend on greater virtues in the populace than we have today, nor do they indicate a generally higher level of public deliberation on pressing questions in that day than in ours."[5] But if virtue and serious public deliberation were not in greater evidence, what about the passionate commitment to politics that underlay all those rallies, party newspapers, and votes? Here Schudson makes a very significant observation about Tocqueville's often cited passages describing Americans' absorption in politics—they are all contained in the first volume of Democracy in America. In the second volume, generally thought to be more reflective than the first, Americans "find it a tiresome inconvenience to exercise political rights which distract them from industry." "When social conditions are equal," Tocqueville continues, " every man tends to live apart, centered in himself and forgetful of the public." This more sober judgment, I might add, was anticipated by Tocqueville's traveling companion, Gustave de Beaumont, who wrote even while the pair were still in America, that "each . . . remains indifferent to the administration of the country, to occupy himself only with his own affairs." (Might I also indulge in a minor heresy by noting that Tocqueville, the acknowledged master in the interpretation of American democracy, was one of those foreign travelers who returned to his country without ever having observed an American political campaign or election?) Schudson proceeds, in any case, to two of the most pungent, and to me most significant sentences in his book: "Would the real American please stand up! Which of the Tocquevilles are we to credit?"[6]

This search for the “real American” (and perhaps, too, the creditable Tocqueville) is the business at hand, at once significant and, to a degree, self-defeating. It is significant because, as Schudson himself recognizes even while repeating the customary affirmation of antebellum America’s newfound democracy, the patterns and meanings of political engagement and civic life in this era are by no means fully understood. And it is self-defeating to the extent that no single “real American” existed; rather, political engagement varied, from well-informed to ignorant, from passionate to apathetic, from committed to skeptical, from virtuous to venal. This, really, is Schudson’s own point, and I will explore it further here, not with the expectation of accumulating some sort of score or graph of variant attitudes and actions, but for the purpose of better understanding the meaning of the transition to partisan democracy—and, perhaps, the meaning of subsequent transitions to a seemingly less vibrant civic life and culture.

I draw here upon a multi-faceted study of nineteenth-century political engagement recently completed by me and my Cornell colleague, Glenn Altschuler. Altschuler and I defined our inquiry broadly—to examine, as we put it, the “space” that politics occupied in American society and culture from the Jacksonian era to the end of the nineteenth century. In pursuit of this deliberately diffuse idea we examined, alongside the partisan newspapers and political correspondence and memoirs that very naturally constitute the basic archive of this kind of political history, a variety of sources generated “outside” of politics—among them novels; pictorial representations of American life by painters, lithographers, and magazine illustrators; and diaries and letters written by ordinary Americans. We also examined the partisan press more broadly than most, reading, indeed, the whole paper and not merely its political content, and the papers of all seasons in a variety of years, during and beyond the various types of campaign seasons, recording, along with whatever else struck us as significant, the political and other communal activities of men named in each paper. Locating these names in manuscript census schedules helped us develop a useful social profile of political and communal activists in the several towns whose papers we examined—towns ranging from Greenfield, Massachusetts and Augusta, Georgia, to Dubuque, Iowa and Opelousas, Louisiana (and for the latter nineteenth century to Graham, Texas and Auburn, California). Another useful political source, and one curiously underutilized by political historians, is the vast amount of recorded testimony of ordinary voters before state legislative committees charged with examining the process of voting in various disputed elections. This source, more than any other, told us of the character of civic engagement on the part of a wide variety of people at the very moment they approached the polls (and not always in situations that the disputed outcome renders suspiciously atypical). I will not try to recapitulate all the arguments and evidence we derived from these sources that tell us of politics "in the air" and "on the ground," but will address in several ways the questions about civic life and culture that emerge from Schudson's longer history.

I turn first to the political process in our several representative communities, and in particular to those parts of it that seem so vital to the broadening and downward diffusion of effective political participation within the second party system. Of all the democratic innovations of the Jacksonian era, none seems more important than the creation of the local caucus, open to all who professed membership in the party, and of the pyramiding array of conventions to which the local caucus (and subsequent conventions below the highest level of the pyramid) sent elected delegates—delegates "fresh from the people," to quote

Andrew Jackson himself. These delegates, according to Jackson and most historians of the era, expressed the popular will more directly and surely than had the legislative caucuses that previously selected candidates and presidential electors, and that defined their party's or faction's political program. Through the caucus and convention system the parties had created, in Robert Wiebe's terms, a "lodge democracy," in which "leaders were made and unmade by their brothers, and all parties in the process assumed an underlying equality."[7] The view we obtain of party caucuses and conventions from the local party papers and from other sources is, however, rather different, and suggests a less complete departure from the structurally more elitist past. Local editors regularly urged party adherents to attend and be heard at the caucuses that were the crucial meeting points of party and citizen, but it is apparent (even from the urgings themselves) that many if not most local caucuses were not well attended. Even more striking is the incompleteness of the caucus system. Caucuses were regularly convened in county seat towns and in various other places, but it is evident that some towns and districts, especially those more distant from the political center of a given county, did not assemble regularly or even at all, placing some portion of the citizens of this predominantly rural nation outside the "lodge democracy." More important than geographic exclusion, though, was the self-exclusion of those in and near the local political center. Why should this have occurred? And why, if I may refer to a more novel and startling finding of our study, should large numbers of delegates selected at local caucuses and lower-rung conventions have failed to attend the conventions to which their partisan "brothers" had sent them?

The best answer to these questions has been known for some time to historians who, however, have made too little of it. Many caucuses and conventions were not well attended because most voters and delegates understood that these meetings were controlled from the top, by the "wire-pullers" who compiled delegate and candidate lists, and who wrote resolutions, well before they convened, and who saw these lists and resolutions through with little fear of interference from those ordinary voters who happened to appear. Some party conclaves, to be sure, were hotly contested, but these contests were perceived, when they were noticed at all, to be between rival leaders or activist factions. This was not the diffuse and free-wheeling debate of partisan "brothers." The editor of the Dubuque Daily Times wrote in 1859 that "the better portion of the electorate retire in disgust from the heat and turmoil of political strife. They leave primary meetings, and County, District and State Conventions to political gamblers and party hacks." The Clarksville [Tennessee] Chronicle wrote a year earlier of local party meetings as "party despotism under a show of popular consultation," and the Opelousas Courier quoted the New Orleans Picayune: "Primary assemblies are a mere blind for the eyes of the masses. They seem to rule, but like the Roman Senate in the time of the first Caesars, only record the edicts of masters. . . . [H]e who dreams the people had anything to do with the result, labors under a pleasant but irrational hallucination."[8] Many of the things political editors wrote can be dismissed as propaganda or posturing, but statements of this sort frequently do ring true (especially when they are aimed at an editor's own party), and they are in any case amply supported by the private correspondence of local political activists. The latter wrote regularly to state leaders and prospective candidates just after and sometimes even before each local caucus or convention, usually to report on who controlled the meeting and its delegate list. In these and in letters written on other occasions, the clear expectation was that someone or some faction did control party meetings. When the former congressman Hugh White wrote to a son who had just lost his own bid for a congressional nomination, he advised him (rather too late) that he should have first gathered in the delegates from his own town. "[T]he next move," wrote the elder White, "would have been to secure more towns, & in order to do that you should have some friend who would go to the man who might control the primary meetings to secure your own delegates."[9] This was far from exceptional; indeed, this kind of analysis and advice, which simply assumes and makes very little fuss over the "wire-pulling" that editors publicly lamented (and as often privately indulged in), is ubiquitous in political correspondence of the antebellum era.

But this answer begs another question, which in turn leads to what is perhaps a more important observation. Why didn't the ordinary voters of a community prevent the manipulation of caucuses and nominating conventions by party insiders? They surely could have, simply by showing up in number at these publicized meetings, rejecting the proposed delegate lists, nominating and selecting delegates from among themselves, and perhaps even proposing, debating, and adopting resolutions from the floor—resolutions that then might even have been worth taking note of as expressions of popular will. That this rarely happened (in the reporting of hundreds of party meetings we saw not one instance of it) suggests something of the shape and limits of the new and apparently more democratic civic world. That the parties abandoned the legislative caucus for more democratic forms of candidate nomination and party definition is significant, but also significant is the manner in which these forms actually functioned, which strongly suggests a less dramatic transition from "deference" to "democracy" in American political culture. Indeed, we may need to understand the caucus and convention system first and foremost as a change in the structure of political activism, among a relatively small group of men who were disproportionately active in politics, from informal and personal to more institutional modes of carrying out political business. The transition that did not occur was the infusion into new political institutions of masses of new players, performing in a notably more diffuse and democratic way the roles from which they formerly had been excluded. "Heretofore our electoral conventions have been very slimly attended," wrote the Clarksville Democratic editor in 1860, "and with very slight manifestations of interest. They have been regarded as the working days of the party and not as occasions for the outpourings of Democratic feeling."[10] One Samuel Love, writing to Ezra Cornell from Ithaca, New York the previous year, explained the popular response to the "working days of the party" a little more fully: "The great mass of people are satisfied with the nominations. They have no feeling who shall be promoted, save qualification, whether it be this or that man—all the same to them—for they are not seeking power or place."[11]

Love's brief statement is interesting on two counts. One is that it adds a little more substance to the distinction that many of our sources draw between the "great mass of people" who did not involve themselves in this stage of the political process, and the small group of party activists who did. The latter, it seems, were seeking "power" and, especially, "place." We might easily dismiss this as a cliché, but many other sources tell us not to; they tell us, indeed, to regard patronage as a driving force within the active political community. Schudson argues that political appointments "were the heart of politics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries," and that the importance of patronage to the parties of that era "cannot be overemphasized."[12] He is surely correct, but he would be equally so if he referred as well to a much earlier period of party development, and to the importance of patronage to party development itself. Space does not permit here a detailed examination of the little world of political "friendship" and patronage, of power wielders and supplicants, and of the temporal and physical world of political service and reward that swirled from election season to election season around the county courthouse, the lawyer's offices clustered around the courthouse square, and the Main Street newspaper offices a block or two away, in county seat towns all across America. It was a specific sub-community, limited in part by the limited gravitational pull of the courthouse square and in part by the limits of political reward in an age of very small government. Patronage, despite or perhaps because of its small size, was a vital bonding agent within this sub-community. Wiebe's "lodge" metaphor may be apt after all, for describing not the democracy Weibe had in mind, but a smaller fellowship, sharing the mysteries, rituals, and "friendship" of a distinct order of men.

Samuel Love's description of the politically complacent "great mass" has, however, another dimension. The ordinary voters of Ithaca were, recall, "satisfied," which does not necessarily mean that they were indifferent. Love suggests that though they may not have cared which place-seekers were in or out, they did keep an eye on the candidates' qualifications for office, and there is nothing in his statement to suggest that they did not care to participate in the political process once it had advanced from the stage of nominations and resolutions—what the Clarksville editor called the "working days of the party"—to the stage of the campaign and election. Here, indeed, we encounter an entirely different set of possibilities and questions. How and to what extent did voters who were not party activists attend to and participate in the political campaign, and what did the campaign mean to ordinary citizens? How did it magnify—and in what ways might it have deepened—the public sphere? And what of voting, the culminating act of democratic self-rule? Historians have made much of the fact that very large numbers of eligible voters did cast ballots; this, indeed, is what provides analysts of American politics with the most substantive and even quantifiable measure of the declension of American democracy from that day to this. But the process of voting has changed along with the turnouts, and this alone requires a different and much less quantifiable history, one sensitive to the meaning as well as the numbers of votes.

The spectacular campaigns of the 1840s, 1850s, and beyond were “popular” in at least two senses: first, they were designed to give the impression of spontaneous and enthusiastic participation on the part of large numbers of citizens; and second, they expressed the subservience of candidates and parties to popular will through the rhetoric and style of campaign speakers and through various forms and emblems, from the torchlight parade (with its suggestion of a vigilant and militant partisan phalanx) to the hickory pole (which could convey either a specific association with Andrew Jackson or a broader connection with popular resistance to tyrannical authority, which, for Whigs, might mean King Andrew himself). During the campaign season, the partisan editors of every town and county vied with each other over the size and enthusiasm of each rally, describing his own party’s affairs as large and enthusiastic, and the other party’s as a “fizzle.” This numbers game underscores how quickly politics had come to be promoted and each party evaluated according to democratic criteria, but the fact that editors could ridicule their opponents’ rallies begins to suggest that a more sober view of the democratic spectacle may be in order. As with the nominating system, the forms were democratic, but the process may have been less so.

Clearly, the size of partisan rallies was often exaggerated by party propagandists. This is well understood, and may not be terribly important, not least because there were numerous rallies that even opposing editors certified as well attended. Other qualifications may be more important. One is that rallies and torchlight parades were less frequent—less a part of the rhythm of the seasons—than historians have generally claimed. Most histories of this era's emerging popular politics focus disproportionately, and some focus exclusively, on presidential campaigns, and neglect to explain that campaigns for governor, congressmen, state legislators, and the like were shorter and generally significantly less spectacular during the three years that lay between each quadrennial presidential contest. Very few campaign and marching clubs were formed, and few torchlight parades lit up the night, during these years. Local elections, too, were generally much less than winter or springtime echoes of the fall campaign. Even where they were explicitly partisan the process of organizing them was so short as to preclude a campaign of any sort. In New York State, for example, where partisan organization for local elections was perhaps most thoroughly developed, nominating caucuses typically were held on the Saturday evening preceding the Tuesday election, leaving the parties and candidates only Monday and election day (overt politicking was taboo on the Sabbath) to make their pitch. In other words, only once in every four years were Americans subjected to a campaign that indulged in all the rituals and symbols of popular democracy. Elections, to be sure, were frequent in America, but not all elections were alike, and most were not preceded by massive and extensive celebrations of popular self-rule.

I used the term "subjected to" a moment ago for two reasons. One is that it emphasizes the organization of campaign rallies that, in fact, rarely contained many elements of spontaneity. The events themselves were manufactured by party leaders, and, to an extent that is generally not recognized, so too were the crowds themselves. The partisan press claimed that large numbers were attracted by their commitment to the party and its ticket. That may have been so, but leaving aside for the moment those who came for the entertainment rather than the politics, there were also significant numbers of political activists who were being sent to all the rallies within the region to help give the appearance of large and enthusiastic turnouts of local people. The party editors revealed this by indirection, mainly by boasting before the event of the numbers that were expected to arrive from various other towns. What they did not go on to say was how systematic this was, or how in their tabulations of crowds attending the various rallies in their region they were counting the same people in one town after another. I should add here that evidence of this aspect of top-down campaign organization comes from better sources than the partisan press. The most politically active of our various antebellum diarists, one William B. Pratt, reports in some detail the various Whig rallies he was sent to during the 1844 presidential campaign as a young member of his local Clay Club. Manufacturing the appearance of popular enthusiasm was a relatively new practice in 1844, but Pratt clearly understood it as a part of the routine of a well-managed political campaign.[13]

The term “subjected to” is apt for another reason. Many Americans enjoyed the lively and sometimes raucous political campaign, but others did not, and there is considerable indication, even in the manner in which partisan editors presented their campaign exhortations and propaganda, that significant numbers of people found both the campaign newspaper and the spectacle intrusive and offensive. Editors frequently began their “campaign papers” apologetically, and ended the political season with what quickly became a kind of ritual cleansing, expressing relief that the unnatural excitement and regrettable vituperation of the campaign were now over, and assuring their weary and less politically engaged readers that they would now return to the more congenial and more important business of conducting the paper in response to the needs of the community rather than those of the political party. This communal sensibility could and often did include favorable reporting on and even intense promotion of various nonpartisan citizens' meetings (often on such vital matters as railroad development or public safety) that Mary Ryan recently has discussed as a central element of what she calls this era's "meeting-place democracy."[14] Drawing upon Robert Putnam's conception of the "social capital" these meetings and those of more ongoing local associations could provide to the parties and to the practice of formal politics, we can recognize, along with Ryan and with Schudson too, a larger "public sphere" of which the parties formed only one element.[15] We may wish to claim, too, that within this public sphere the political party and the larger community were easily accommodated to one another. This is an attractive idea, made more compelling by the fact that, in our representative communities at least, those most active in the political party were also the most active participants in nonpartisan associations. But it is significant that in the partisan newspapers of our communities a sharp line was drawn by editors between the nonpartisan "meeting-place democracy" and the practice of partisan politics. More specifically, the latter was not to intrude on the former—lyceums and lodges (to say nothing of churches and schools), and even those public meetings that dealt with what might have been regarded as important political issues. In Dubuque, the Whig editor rebuked one of his fellow Whigs who had criticized Democrats at a meeting called to promote the formation of a local steamboat company—a vital public issue in this Mississippi River town. “Political issues should be discussed,” he wrote, “and political differences settled, on political occasions. Meetings for business . . . ought, if possible, to be held sacred from the intrusions of political asperity.”[16] We believe that these kinds of statements drew upon a widespread sentiment that editors knew they must express if they were to retain a sufficient readership. For there were many among their readers who wanted a community not a party paper, and who perceived local meetings and associations not as “social capital” for the political parties but as alternative venues for a more authentic, nonpartisan public sphere.

Perhaps such skeptics and sober folks did attend an occasional campaign rally for the fun of it, and in any case there were surely many at each rally who came for no other purpose. The parties understood that they must provide a good deal of entertainment to attract local people, and political speakers (including even Lincoln and Douglas, as we have seen) learned that they must make the crowd roar rather than think. Ernest Duvergier de Hauranne, who visited the United States during the 1864 election, and who made many astute observations about it, reports to us the manner in which Illinois gubernatorial candidate Richard James Oglesby instructed voters as to the proper position on Civil War dissent: “If you are loyal,” he shouted, “do as I do, go straight to the Copperheads, to the traitors, and tell them: ‘Sir, your are a miserable creature, a knave, a wretch, and a damned thief!’ As for myself, I say to their face: ‘Yes sir, I hope you will be hanged!’ If these creatures try to enter the voting booth, we will shoot them!” “The American people,” concluded Duvergier de Hauranne, “especially here in the West, love these raw, bloody slabs of butcher’s meat.”[17] The political rally in all its dimensions—the torchlight parade, the music, the fireworks, and even the speeches—was designed to excite and amuse a population that had available to them what we would regard today as only a limited array of similar attractions. For some who attended, the specifically political component of the rally was primary and the entertainment only secondary, but for others, surely, the order was reversed. We cannot separate the mixture of public purpose and private amusement in the massing of citizens at campaign rallies, but we can at least recognize the mixture itself, along with the organizational efforts of the parties to produce both the events and the crowds, as qualifications to any simple association we might make between the spectacular campaign and participatory democracy.

This same qualification, finally, applies with equal force to the final and most crucial act of the political process, the casting of ballots. Historians have long known of the various apolitical attractions of the nineteenth-century polling place—the free liquor, the cash bribes, the gambling, the sheer fun and excitement of a large crowd in town—and of the strenuous efforts of the political parties to bring to the polls those voters who did not come on their own. But too little has been made of these attractions and efforts, all of which contrast starkly with the process of voting today. In particular, few have attempted to find in them some part of the explanation for the striking increases in voter turnout during the second party period. To us, partisan election-day organization and effort seems particularly important. Parties may not have succeeded in reaching all of their voters during the nominating process or the campaign (with respect to the former, we have questioned whether they even wished to), but they were a good deal more assiduous and successful in reaching them on election day. Party vigilance committees were assigned specific districts and given voter lists, names were struck off as voters appeared, wagons were pressed into service, and, assisted by the familiar roads and houses of this small-town and rural landscape—in many places an ideal human landscape for voter mobilization—party workers went out and brought in as many as possible of those who had not already voted. Political correspondence makes it clear that wherever parties were well organized every voter was called upon in person, at least once and sometimes two or three times, in the course of the afternoon. Under these conditions, and quite apart from civic responsibility, partisan commitment, or the urge for a free drink, a two-dollar bribe, or a ten-dollar bet, the remarkable thing is not that so many men voted, but that some managed not to.

That the masses of antebellum voters included significant numbers of men who knew and cared too little about the candidates they were voting for is underscored by election-day editorials warning voters of bogus tickets, urging them to compare the tickets they were handed to posted candidate lists, and bemoaning the fact that too few would heed this advice. Post-election testimony confirms their concern. Many of the men examined by state legislative committees inquiring into disputed elections testified that they did not examine their tickets, and that they did not know the names of the men they had voted for. Some of these voters, and others, testified also to the confusion and intimidation of the polling place, of having been handed many different tickets, of having been hounded into casting a particular ballot by some partisan "shoulder hitter," of having been too drunk to know just what they were doing. To be sure, some of these men may have cared a good deal—and some may have been careful—about the party they were voting for, even if they did not know the names of the candidates. But it is clear that ignorance and apolitical motives were significant parts of the election-day process in this age of massive voter turnout. Again, we cannot count the meanings of votes as easily as we can count the votes themselves. It may not be unreasonable to guess, however, that a significant portion of the drop-off in voting from the nineteenth century to the twentieth results from the sobering up and quieting down of the polling place by late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century reforms—reforms that made voting less attractive to those whose votes never did constitute the kind of public, democratic act we customarily attribute to the exercise of the franchise.

I have addressed here only the political process, and not the substance—the specific public issues and the affective symbols of group identity and aspiration—that the partisan system of nominations, resolutions, campaign rallies, and elections was supposed to carry forward. And if I have suggested that the civic "world we have lost" of the first generations of active and massive self-rule was not as extensively absorbing as we have imagined it to have been, it may be that my focus on the political process has caused me to miss substantive public concerns that for one reason or another may have been excluded from the partisan system even while they animated Americans to think and act beyond their private interests and daily rounds. One of the most striking facts about the era during which mass-based political parties and processes took shape is the small size of the public sector, and the relatively remote and indirect effect of government on most people's lives. The parties railed against each other over substantive issues such as banks and tariffs, but these were things that most citizens cared less and less about as the parties developed their increasingly elaborate methods of voter mobilization. By 1850 at least, and we believe even earlier, many Americans perceived the partisan system as something that operated primarily for the politicians themselves, and that connected to their own lives more remotely—at best as a necessary mechanism for validating their own authority in a democracy (however small and indirect its present effects); at worst as a corrupt assemblage of professional seekers of power and place. Our diaries, novels, and other "nonpolitical" sources, to which I have had time to make only the most fleeting reference here, underscore in a variety of ways the failure of the parties, and of formal politics, to secure a more prominent place in many people's lives. But there were public issues out there, among at least some of the people, to which the parties did not give effective voice. Alcoholic drink was one, and on the local and state level parties did learn to accommodate to this issue, although often in ways that obscured its relation to traditional lines of partisan combat. More importantly, there was slavery, and this issue, which the parties did their best to avoid and bury, came over much time to involve very large numbers of Americans in serious public debate, caused the reorganization of the party system itself, and ultimately produced the crisis that deepened the public awareness and increased the public action of nearly every citizen.

There was, then, a significant public life and culture, in and beyond party politics, in antebellum America. It was, however, a more variable, and generally a more limited set of commitments and actions than historians have claimed—one whose customary limits have perhaps been obscured by the one great and "peculiar" issue, cutting against the grain of all else in the system, that energized so many citizens to act in public ways. This is an unusually negative view, I realize, of what is ordinarily taken to be a great age of democratic institution building and popular political engagement. But if this view is correct, does it not mean that we have unjustly accused ourselves of squandering a more vibrant and extensively persuasive civic commitment and culture? Michael Schudson observes at the end of his book that "we do not need to beat ourselves with the stick of the past," and I confess that Glenn Altschuler and I, in what I will here claim to be an unconscious homage to Schudson's achievement, have used the same metaphor to conclude our own study of American citizens good and bad. The most important point to emerge from both of these books is to make no simple comparisons between different eras, but to enrich our narratives, as Schudson at least has done, with the variable and changing meanings of civic life.

NOTES

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[1] Edmund S. Morgan, "Conflict and Consensus in the American Revolution," in Stephen G. Kurtz and James H. Hutson, eds., Essays on the American Revolution (Chapel Hill, 1973), pp. 289-309.

[2] Michael Schudson, The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life (New York, 1998), pp. 11-89; Gordon S. Wood, The Radicalism of the American Revolution (New York,1992); Ronald P. Formisano, "Deferential-Participant Politics: The Early Republic's Political Culture, 1789-1840," American Political Science Review 68 (1974): 473-87.

[3] Gary B. Nash, The Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness, and the Origins of the American Revolution (Cambridge, Mass., 1979); Michael Zuckerman,

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"Tocqueville, Turner, and Turds: Four Stories of Manners in Early America," Journal of American History 85 (1998): 13-42.

[4] Schudson, The Good Citizen, p. 132. See Michael E. McGerr, The Decline of Popular Politics: The American North, 1865-1928 (New York, 1986).

[5] Schudson, The Good Citizen, pp. 133-43. The quotation is from p. 143.

[6] Ibid., pp. 134-35. Beaumont is quoted in George Wilson Pierson, Tocqueville in America (New York, 1938; Baltimore, 1996), p. 653.

[7] Robert H. Wiebe, Self-Rule: A Cultural History of American Democracy (Chicago, 1995), p. 74.

[8] Dubuque Daily Times, August 25, 1859; Clarksville Chronicle, October 1, 1858; Opelousas Courier, October 2, 1858. These quotations, and others, can be found in Glenn C. Altschuler and Stuart M. Blumin, Rude Republic: Americans and their Politics in the Nineteenth Century (Princeton, 2000), pp. 53-54. Statements of this sort were frequently directed toward the caucuses and conventions of the opposing party, but editors did occasionally criticize their own parties in these terms, and it is clear that when they did so they availed themselves of a common language about partisan professionalism and control.

[9] Hugh White to Will White, October 25, 1859, Hugh White Papers, Rare and Manuscript Collections, Carl A. Kroch Library, Cornell University.

[10] Clarksville Jeffersonian, July 18, 1860.

[11] Samuel Love to Ezra Cornell, October 31, 1859, Ezra Cornell Papers, Rare and Manuscript Collections, Carl A. Kroch Library, Cornell University.

[12] Schudson, Good Citizen, pp. 147, 155.

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[13] William B. Pratt diary, Rare and Manuscript Collections, Carl A. Kroch Library, Cornell University.

[14] Mary P. Ryan, Civic Wars: Democracy and Public Life in the American City during the Nineteenth Century (Berkeley, Calif., 1997).

[15] Robert D. Putnam, Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy (Princeton, N. J., 1993).

[16] Weekly Dubuque Tribune, February 11, 1852.

[17] Ernest Duvergier de Hauranne, Huit Mois en Amerique: Lettres et Notes de Voyages, 1864-1865, ed. and trans. Ralph H. Bowen, as A Frenchman in Lincoln's America, 2 vols. (Chicago, 1974), vol. 1, p. 283.