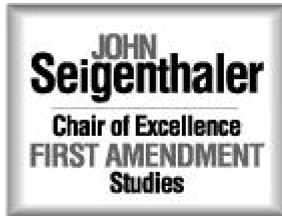

Party Politics, Citizenship, and Collective Action in Nineteenth-Century America: A Response to Stuart Blumin and Michael Schudson

JEFFREY L. PASLEY
University of Missouri-Columbia

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My reactions to both Michael Schudson's book and Stuart Blumin's paper have been very divided. On the one hand, I think they are too quick to dismiss nineteenth-century party democracy, and perhaps party-based democracy more generally, in favor of our own era's more individualistic ideals (and realities) of citizenship. To take only one issue as an example, there is a great deal more evidence out there than Blumin admits of popular interest in party politics, especially in the form of popular culture such as political humor, prints, almanacs, songs, and plays.[1] On the other hand, having spent much time (in the course of my own research on partisan newspaper editors) in the company of early party hacks, flacks, and other types of professional politicians, I would have to agree with Blumin and Schudson that it will not do to treat the nineteenth century as some sort of golden age of American citizenship, a political Garden of Eden from which the Progressive reformers cast us out.

I would also have to agree that lower turnouts and fewer torchlight parades are small prices to pay for getting rid of the massive institutionalized venality and racial and sexual exclusionism that characterized nineteenth-century party politics. Certainly little of significance would ever have been done to address the most pressing moral issue in American life, slavery, had that matter been left strictly to the party system. Indeed, the mid-nineteenth-century party system was to a large degree *designed* to keep that issue off the table. Concerned about the sectionalism that had reared its head (in the form of the Missouri crisis) during the "Era of Good Feelings"

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[1]For examples, see Vera Brodsky Lawrence, *Music for Patriots, Politicians, and Presidents: Harmonies and Discords of the First Hundred Years* (New York: Macmillan, 1975); The Chestnut Brass Company and Friends, *Hail to the Chief! American Political Marches, Songs & Dirges of the 1800s*, Sony Classical compact disc SFK 62485; Bernard F. Reilly, *American Political Prints, 1766-1876: A Catalog of the Collections in the Library of Congress* (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1991); Jean H. Baker, *Affairs of Party: The Political Culture of Northern Democrats in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1983); Roger A. Fischer, *Tippecanoe and Trinkets Too: The Material Culture of American Presidential Campaigns, 1828-1984* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

period after national party lines collapsed, Martin Van Buren of New York proposed to South Carolina and Virginia leaders an alliance between the "planters of the South" and the "plain republicans of the north" that would throw its support behind Andrew Jackson in the election of 1828. If there were no national party distinctions, Van Buren wrote, "prejudices between free and slave holding states will inevitably take their place." This alliance, of course, became the Democratic party and the initial basis for the development of the so-called mass party system that had fully emerged by the late 1830s.[2]

One could even argue that the mid-nineteenth-century party system did even worse with the rare issues that it did squarely face. The driving force in the original Jacksonian coalition was not really the North or the South but instead the West, where I would argue that Jackson's huge popularity owed largely to his long record as a highly successful military antagonist of the American Indians and a hardliner against their land rights. Erasing the Indian presence east of the Mississippi with as little delay and as few legal niceties as possible was one of Jackson's very few clear issue positions when he was elected, and it was no accident that the Indian removal bill was one of his administration's very first priorities.[3]

From that point on in the nineteenth-century, even in times when the United States government could accomplish little else in terms of policy, it worked assiduously and effectively to project its power into the Indian territories and to see that the same were transferred into the hands of white settlers, land speculators, and railroad companies as quickly as possible. During

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[2]Donald B. Cole, *Martin Van Buren and the American Political System* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 150-52; Richard H. Brown, "The Missouri Crisis, Slavery, and the Politics of Jacksonianism," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 65 (Winter 1966): 55-72.

[3]Ronald Satz, *American Indian Policy in the Jacksonian Era* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975), 9-13. See also, Michael Paul Rogin, *Fathers and Children: Andrew Jackson and the Subjugation of the American Indian* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975); David S. Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler, *Old Hickory's War: Andrew Jackson and the Quest for Empire* (Mechanicsburg, Pa.: Stackpole Books, 1996).

the antebellum years, this was particularly true of the Democratic Party, within which the speedy expropriation of the Indians was a key area of the agreement among various factions that differed sharply over issues such as slavery and banking. Thus during a presidency overshadowed by a horrific economic depression, an embattled Van Buren waged a brutal, protracted war against the Florida Seminoles partly because Indian removal and white territorial expansion were popular policies within his party (especially its southern and western wings) at a time when many Democrats were severely disaffected with their own president.[4]

However horrific, the example of Indian land acquisition does show that more than what Schudson calls "affiliation" was going on in nineteenth-century party politics. Policies were being selected by the electorate and implemented by the national state. By all indications, a majority of the voters wanted the natives stripped of their lands, and the U.S. government duly carried out that directive. Schudson's notion of a "politics of affiliation" flows from a long tradition in postwar historical writing of treating the antebellum American state as, in John Murrin's words, "a midget institution in a giant land," an insignificant force "with almost no internal functions" and no ability to effect major changes or drive historical trends. The conquest of the American Indians by the United States government is only one area in which this view is beginning to look myopic.[5] The antebellum national state may seem puny by European or twentieth-century American standards, but it rarely seemed small to the natives, forced as they were to contend with myriad, overlapping

[4]Cole, *Van Buren and the Political System*, 364-66; Satz, *American Indian Policy*, 211-45; John K. Mahon, *History of the Second Seminole War, 1835-1842*, revised ed. (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1985); Francis Paul Prucha, *The Great Father: The United States Government and the American Indians* (1984; reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), Volume I.

[5]Quotations from John M. Murrin, "The Great Inversion, or Court Versus Country: A Comparison of the Revolution Settlements in England (1688-1721) and America (1776-1816)," in *Three British Revolutions: 1641, 1688, 1776*, ed. J.G.A. Pocock (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 425. For a thorough review and strong critique of the historiography on the American state, see Richard R. John, "Governmental Institutions As Agents of Change: Rethinking American Political Development in the Early Republic, 1787-1835," *Studies in American Political Development* 11 (1997): 347-380. For the term "politics of affiliation," see Michael Schudson, *The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life* (New York: Free Press, 1998), 6.

projections of federal power into their territories and culture. These included not only soldiers and forts, but also Indian agencies, trading posts, schools, and the various functionaries who staffed them; jointly, all these agents of government were charged with the physical, political, and cultural subjugation of the indigenous peoples.[6]

Certainly we do not need, as Michael Schudson wrote, to "beat ourselves with the stick of the past" over the loss of the kind of politics that could spur the expropriation of Native Americans while blocking efforts to end the bondage of African Americans. However, to prevent likely overuse of that metaphor (which also appears in Stuart Blumin's paper), I will employ a substitute, and say that we should not wear the hair-shirt of history.[7]

On the other hand, to go back to Schudson's metaphor, we should also not beat the past with the stick of the present. I think that occasionally happens in The Good Citizen and in Blumin's paper. In both, there is a certain problem of using anachronistic and sometimes contradictory standards to judge past political cultures. Both Schudson and Blumin criticize the Lincoln-Douglas debates for not being sufficiently deliberative or substantive according to our more enlarged views of what the real issues of 1858 were: Lincoln and Douglas were too absorbed in momentary issues and conspiracy theories, too intent on staging the political equivalent of a prize fight in which each had to get the requisite number of jabs and body blows in on the other. Of course, many other scholars have disagreed with this assessment of the debates, and the Blumin-Schudson view would be more convincing if they did not then reverse field and suggest that probably the audience was not really engaged or even listening to what Lincoln and Douglas were saying, no matter how

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[6]For just a taste of what the Indians faced in terms of government policies and agencies, see Prucha, *Great Father*, vol. I; Francis Paul Prucha, *The Sword of the Republic: The United States Army on the Frontier, 1783-1846* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1969); Michael D. Green, *The Politics of Indian Removal: Creek Government and Society in Crisis* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982).

[7]Schudson, *Good Citizen*, 313-14.

lowbrow and entertaining they tried to be.[8] Which was the problem, too much entertainment or too much boring deliberation? The suggestion is that people were only there because they had nothing else to do.

But this is not really true: small towns were much more "urban" in the nineteenth century than they are in our own era, at least in terms of cultural amenities (though these were not necessarily available on an everyday basis). There were plenty of touring speakers, musicians, theater companies, circuses, and minstrel shows around, and many towns built lyceums and "opera houses" to host such events. There were also countless religious activities such as Sunday Schools, camp meetings, and church services that were more frequent, elaborate, and well-attended than is the case today. Village social life was also far more active and organized than is common now; memoirs and diaries from the nineteenth century recall endless rounds of formal visits and outings, in addition to whole categories of community events that would disappear from most country towns by the twentieth century, such as barn-raisings, corn-huskings, and militia musters. While granting that nineteenth-century Americans had much less individual choice in using their leisure time, it seems narrowly presentist to assume that nineteenth-century Americans took no interest in their more communal pastimes, which included open-air political debates, simply because, 150 years later, we know that people seem to prefer football, NASCAR, and the Jerry Springer Show. Surely, we should not assume that the mass entertainment industry is moving the culture in some inexorable Hegelian fashion toward a closer and closer approximation of the people's real tastes.[9]

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[8]Schudson, *Good Citizen*, 133-43. For judicious assessments of the debates that find much civic merit in them while steering clear of the mythology debunked by Schudson and Blumin, see David Zarefsky, *Lincoln, Douglas, and Slavery: In the Crucible of Public Debate* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); David M. Potter, *The Impending Crisis, 1848-1861* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 328-55.

[9]Lewis Atherton, *Main Street on the Middle Border* (1954; reprint, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), 121-42; Carl Bode, *The American Lyceum: Town Meeting of the Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956); Jack Larkin, *The Reshaping of Everyday Life, 1790-1840* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1989), 232-44, 258-303.

In fact, the magic of the Lincoln-Douglas debates is that they provided both entertainment and politics. They were political prize fights that, precisely because they were entertaining, enticed large audiences to take a pretty heavy dose of public affairs: a series of lengthy, detailed political speeches on the pressing issues of the day, full of complex intellectual jousting between two formidable political thinkers. It surely does show some fundamental difference in political culture, and may even be one that redounds favorably on the nineteenth century, that large audiences of citizens could be convinced to attend, or attend to, even a fraction of such functions, on any terms at all. If there were children playing, people talking, and other activities swirling around the debates, facts cited by Schudson and Blumin as indicators of citizen apathy, that only shows the degree to which nineteenth century political parties did not try to disembed politics from the fabric of social life in the way that the ideal of the informed citizen seems to demand. I just do not see how a few distractions and a modicum of lowbrow entertainment value detracts from the democratic attractiveness of the Lincoln-Douglas debates. Quite the contrary.

Another anachronism problem concerns the grounds on which Professor Blumin wishes to downgrade the level of democracy in nineteenth-century party politics. To be more specific, Blumin wishes to sever the link he alleges that previous historians have made between the rise of organized political parties and spectacular campaigning on the one hand and "participatory democracy" on the other. The key to Blumin's idea of "participatory democracy" (a term that appears three times in the paper) appears to be spontaneity. It seems that political participation that is intentionally stimulated from the outside, that is not motivated solely by the internal, intellectual impulses of the individual, is not truly democratic. Real democracy would be a spontaneous, unmediated expression of the popular will. This seems to me a twentieth-century idea

of democracy, one that might be more usefully applied to the 1960s student groups that actually espoused it than to nineteenth-century parties.[10]

While they sometimes wrote of democracy as a mystical force and certainly strove to project an image of unforced popularity, almost no nineteenth century politicians of any kind (including reformers who abjured the party system) believed that democracy could ever be completely spontaneous. These generations devised the very idea of mass party organization. They valued it and wrote treatises in favor of it, especially in favor of the way it organized politics and forged some connection between elections and government.[11]

Those Americans who did not embrace party — sometimes even those who denounced the "ungodly politicians" — copied party methods. Writing in 1835, just as the strenuous campaigning of the Jacksonian Democrats was moving the party system toward its full development, the influential evangelist and religious reformer Charles G. Finney advised Christians that they needed to match the parties if they expected to compete successfully for the public's attention:

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[10]The term "participatory democracy" was popularized by the 1962 "Port Huron Statement" of the Students for a Democratic Society and became a rather vague and flexible catchphrase for the New Left more generally. Tom Hayden first used it denote a supplement to representative democracy, but it quickly came more commonly to mean some "radical *alternative* to representative institutions." See James Miller, *"Democracy is in the Streets": From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 141-54, quotation on 152-53. Given that the whole concept of "participatory democracy" was designed to point up the inherent shortcomings of representative government and the party system, at a time when citizen participation in the party system was at an all-time high, it seems a standard that no party system, especially one that existed in the nineteenth century, could ever attain. Moreover, even the SDS had leaders who worked hard to organize campuses, mount protests, and generate support for their ideas, despite the group's faith in consensual decision-making and spontaneous mass political expression.

[11]Examples of pro-party treatises include Frederick Grimke, *The Nature and Tendency of Free Institutions* [1856], ed. John William Ward (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1968); and Martin Van Buren, *Inquiry into the Origin and Course of Political Parties in the United States* (1867; reprint, New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1967). For a convenient sampler illustrating the efflorescence of romantic democratic thought in the antebellum decades, see Joseph L. Blau, ed., *Social Theories of Jacksonian Democracy: Representative Writings of the Period* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964). For broader discussions of nineteenth-century thought on parties, see Michael L. Wallace, "Ideologies of Party in the Ante-Bellum Republic" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1973); and Richard Hofstadter, *The Idea of a Party System: The Rise of Legitimate Opposition in the United States, 1780-1840* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969). For examples of nineteenth-century Americans' deep feelings for party, see Baker, *Affairs of Party*.

> What do the politicians do? They get up meetings, circulate handbills and pamphlets, blaze away in the newspapers, send ships about the streets on wheels with flags and sailors, send conveyances all over the town, with handbills, to bring people up to the polls - all to gain attention to their cause and elect their candidate. All these are their "measures," and for their *end* they are wisely calculated. The object is to get up an excitement, and bring the people out. . . . I do not mean to say that their measures are pious, or right, but only that they are wise, in the sense that they are the appropriate application of means to the end.

Evangelical Christians, Finney argued, needed to become politicians of the spirit, campaigning for souls just as aggressively and systematically as party men did for votes: "The object of the ministry is to get all the people to feel that the devil has no right to rule this world, but that they ought all to give themselves to God, and 'vote in' the Lord Jesus Christ as the Governor of the universe."[12]

Many other nineteenth-century reformers, including a faction of the abolitionist movement, went further than merely emulating methods and started their own political parties. All the major nineteenth-century political uprisings against the major parties took highly organized form, usually resulting in the creation of new parties. It was not the party form or the lack of spontaneity in politics that actuated groups like the Antimasons and the Know-Nothings and the Populists, but the venal and unprincipled nature of the particular parties that were dominant in their times. The idea that mass political participation could ever occur automatically, without any kind of organization or stimulus, was one that nineteenth-century people might idealize but never expected, if indeed such a phenomenon ever occurred in history outside of a few moments in certain revolutions.[13]

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[12]Charles Grandison Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* [1835], ed. William G. McLoughlin (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960), 150, 181, 193, 272.

[13]On antiparty movements that started parties, see, Richard H. Sewell, *Ballots for Freedom: Antislavery Politics in the United States, 1837-1860* (1976; reprint, New York: Norton, 1980); Paul Goodman, *Towards a Christian Republic: Antimasonry and the Great Transition in New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Tyler Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery: The Northern Know Nothings and the Politics of the 1850s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Mark Voss-Hubbard, "The 'Third Party Tradition' Reconsidered: Third Parties and American Public Life, 1830-1900," *Journal of American History* 86 (June 1999): 121-50.

What is most curious to me is that Blumin seems to regard his denials of the existence of a spontaneous participatory democracy in the nineteenth century as a correction of some dominant interpretation. While there certainly is an argument that American politics engaged a greater percentage of the people in the nineteenth century than before or since, surely no serious political historian has ever claimed that the great political battles and spectacles of the party period occurred spontaneously. Indeed, it was the high level of party organization that the historians implicitly attacked by Blumin, such as Michael McGerr, were celebrating; the admirable thing about the nineteenth-century parties was that (unlike later models) they made the effort to involve the masses in party politics, operating on a level that even an uninformed and unsophisticated citizen might be able to respond to. Yes, mass participation in the nineteenth century was sometimes corruptly stimulated, frequently over-hyped, and lacking in critical intelligence, but should we damn the old parties for using entertainment to entice citizens to exercise their rights? Moreover, the image of mass participation that the nineteenth-century parties strove to project was an important thing in itself, asserting forcefully that mass participation was a good idea. As Michael Schudson suggests, the twentieth-century idea of public opinion and the expansive, romantic 1960s ideal of direct participatory democracy would be impossible without the image of the people's will as a massive unstoppable force that was fashioned by all that nineteenth-century humbug.[14]

A somewhat more technical point I might raise is the narrative of the rise of mass political participation upon which both Schudson and Blumin rely, in their varying ways. This narrative contends that mass democracy was achieved—and the hold of coteries of national statesmen and so-called local notables broken—only in the 1830s, with the emergence of two national parties

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[14]Michael E. McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics: The American North, 1865-1928* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 3-41; Schudson, *Good Citizen*, 228.

with elaborate “permanent” organizations that relied on formally democratic nominating devices such as the party convention and regularly mounted spectacular campaigns. The establishment of this two-party system inaugurated a party period of democracy that lasted into the 1890s. As both Blumin and Schudson note, extremely high levels of voter turnout, supposedly higher than any time before or since, are the empirical basis for this interpretation, which has been the standard one since not long before I was born (the mid-1960s).[15]

The problem, for those of us in my historiographic generation who have studied American politics before the 1830s and below the level of the statesmen and notables, is that this narrative does not seem very accurate. While the politics of the earlier Early Republic do not look very familiar—for one thing, there is a near-total absence of party conventions or elaborate national party organizations—if one cares to look, one can find an abundance of partisan political activity and even mass participation from the 1790s on, not the 1830s. Some of the earlier and less tendentious exponents of the "party period" thesis actually acknowledged this, and one scholar, Richard P. McCormick, even provided tables showing that contrary to the general argument, there were very high voter turnouts in many early nineteenth-century elections.[16] But a couple of factors prevented this information from affecting the overall narrative. One was a commitment to a certain teleological notion that there was a "modern" model of party politics struggling to be born in this

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[15]Works advancing or reflecting this interpretation include: William Nisbet Chambers and Walter Dean Burnham, eds., *The American Party Systems: Stages of Political Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967); Ronald P. Formisano, "Deferential-Participant Politics: The Early Republic's Political Culture, 1789-1840,"*American Political Science Review* 68 (1974): 473-487; idem, *The Birth of Mass Political Parties: Michigan, 1827-1861* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971); idem, *The Transformation of Political Culture: Massachusetts Parties, 1790s-1840s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983); Paul Kleppner, et al., *The Evolution of American Electoral Systems* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1981); Richard L. McCormick, *The Party Period and Public Policy: American Politics From the Age of Jackson to the Progressive Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Joel H. Silbey, *The American Political Nation, 1838-1893* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1991).

[16]Richard P. McCormick, "New Perspectives on Jacksonian Politics," *American Historical Review* 65 (Jan. 1960): 288-301.

period, leading to unproductive semantic debates on such questions as the difference between parties and a party system.[17] The other was a lack of conclusive data, which was a very serious problem in an era when quantitative methods were just coming into vogue among political historians. Before 1824, no state other than Massachusetts took responsibility for keeping election returns, making it difficult to generate the kind of year-by-year national election statistics that were used to develop the party period interpretation. This data gap has rendered the period from the 1790s to the 1820s terra incognita in U.S. electoral history.[18]

Fortunately, this territory is now in the process of being charted, through the efforts of something called the First Democratization Project, conducted with National Science Foundation and National Endowment for the Humanities grants by Prof. Andrew W. Robertson of the City University of New York's Lehman College and Philip Lampi of the American Antiquarian Society. These scholars have been painstakingly compiling early election statistics town by town, state by state, year by year out of whatever sources are available: newspaper reports, legislative committee records, county courthouse archives, and even private manuscript collections. They plan to make their data available to researchers through the University of Michigan's Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research when the work is complete. What they have found so far is truly remarkable, though not that surprising to some of us who know the politics of the early 1800s. Robertson and Lampi have discovered that voter turnout reaches and stays at the historically high levels of 60, 70, and 80+ percent of eligible voters not in the 1830s,

[17]See, for example, Ronald P. Formisano, "Federalists and Republicans: Parties, Yes — System, No," in Kleppner, et al., *Evolution of American Electoral Systems*, 33-76.

[18]Maryland is one of the few states for which a good series of election records have been found and studied, and the results (high voter turnouts and consistently partisan electoral behavior) do not support the dominant interpretation. See David A. Bohmer, "The Maryland Electorate and the Concept of a Party System in the Early National Period," in *The History of American Electoral Behavior*, ed. Joel H. Silbey, Allan G. Bogue, and William H. Flanigan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 146-73.

but in the early 1810s, and earlier in some places, with a clear upward trend beginning in the late 1790s. They have even found several New England towns where the turnout approached 100 percent.[19]

What stimulated these levels of participation in the absence of national party institutions? Burning issues first of all, such as the unpopular War of 1812 and the wrenching depression following the Panic of 1819, and fierce partisan identities rooted in ideology, which managed to exist without benefit of massive institutional parties that were yet undreamt of. To amplify and focus these ideological divisions, there were a whole array of community political practices and small-scale institutions in use during this period, whose partisan political functions scholars have only begun to understand. Some of these were updated or not-so-updated versions of colonial and revolutionary traditions, and some were new: they included partisan holiday celebrations (which helped popularize the Fourth of July holiday), community rituals such as pole-raisings and the burning of effigies, parades, debating societies, social clubs, tavern gatherings, street meetings, political festivals, orations, illuminations of houses and buildings (often with giant political transparencies), and, my favorite, banquets where a series of carefully worded toasts would be given, sometimes 15 or 20 belts of whiskey long, which would then be published and serve as a kind of local party or factional platform. The historian David Waldstreicher has labeled this set of practices "celebratory politics."[20]

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[19]Andrew W. Robertson, telephone conversation with author, 10 November 1999. Some of the First Democratization Project data are utilized in Andrew Robertson and Philip Lampi, "The Election of 1800 Revisited," paper presented at the American Historical Association annual meeting, Chicago, Ill., 9 January 2000.

[20]David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776-1820* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1997). For other works covering aspects of this festive political culture, see Peter Thompson, *Rum Punch and Revolution: Taverngoing and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999); Simon P. Newman, *Parades and the Politics of the Street: Festive Culture in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997); Len Travers, *Celebrating the Fourth: Independence Day and the Rites of Nationalism in the Early Republic* (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997).

There were also the newspapers, which emerged with clear partisan identities and as chief definers of party ideology long before any meaningful or continuing party organization existed to capture or direct them, as many histories of journalism would have it. Newspaper offices often served as unofficial party clubhouses and meeting rooms, and newspaper editors, though usually printers by training and thus clearly working class in their social identity (as "fresh from the people") as a literate person could be in those days) typically became the chief spokesmen, major organizers, and sometimes out and out leaders of their local parties.[21]

As Stuart Blumin argues for the later period, none of this popular politicking was quite uniform from location to location, and sometimes the practices reflected at least vestiges of old social hierarchies. In addition, the men involved in organizing them certainly did form a distinct subculture. Yet it is also clear from the First Democratization Project data that these practices were effective in stimulating heavy participation in elections. Indeed, it was this early partisan culture that provided much of political force behind the movement that made universal white male suffrage a reality in most states during the 1810s and 1820s. The local variation arose partly from the decentralized, uninstitutionalized nature of the early political system, in which national parties lacked permanent organizational structures such as national committees and operated more as "civic associations" than institutions in the usual sense.[22] The early parties responded to national and state level developments, but they were firmly rooted in local communities and shaped (within each community or region) into a unique form based on local values, practices, and traditions.

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[21]Jeffrey L. Pasley, *"The Tyranny of Printers": The Rise of Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, forthcoming).

[22]Wilson Carey McWilliams, "Parties as Civic Associations," in Gerald M. Pomper, ed., *Party Renewal in America: Theory and Practice* (New York: Praeger, 1980), 51-68; Cornelius P. Cotter and Bernard C. Hennessey, *Politics without Power: The National Party Committees* (New York: Atherton Press, 1964), 1-38.

How does this new information revise the larger narrative? At the very least, it shows that many innovations and developments that the mass parties have been given credit for date back much earlier. It will be noticed that the mid-century parties did nothing so much as inflate many of these older traditions, such as the parades and clubs, to preposterously large and elaborate proportions. The new data may also sever the link that has been made between mass political participation and mass party organization, though not between party in a broader sense and political participation. In fact, the First Democratization Project statistics make me wonder about the meaning of all those layers of committees and caucuses and conventions (with so many opportunities for wire-pulling and political back scratching) that the mid-century parties put between the people and the candidates and the government. It may be that the transition from the loose decentralized parties of Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton to the mass party organizations of Martin Van Buren and Abraham Lincoln were a step back for American democracy rather a great leap forward. In some respects, the trend away from meaningful mass participation may have begun long before the decline of popular politics in the 1890s. In one sense, then, the new voting data may reinforce Stuart Blumin's strictures against the political culture of the "party period."

In closing, I want to say a few words about citizenship then and now. Having renounced the golden age theory, I do think we should be careful not to let our own age off too lightly. This was brought home to me as I was driving to campus recently. I found myself behind a very ordinary-looking car—not a pickup truck with a gun rack and a Confederate flag sticker, but the kind of car that some college professor might drive—with a bumper sticker addressing the question of citizenship that is before this conference. "A man without a gun is a subject," it read. "A man with a gun is a citizen." I wish I could say that this kind of radical alienation from civil society and

organized political life—this idea that only the personal use of force, and not any kind of representative or rights-protective institution, can safely mediate between the individual and the state—is rare, but my experience of observing the culture and living in middle American localities like Tallahassee, Florida, and Columbia, Missouri, tells me that it is rather commonplace.

I think this points up the inadequacy of the rights-regarding citizenship that Michael Schudson rather celebrates in the later sections of his book. The rights revolution may have provided us with more opportunities to exercise citizenship—in our families and workplaces and soccer fields, as Schudson argues—but somehow none of them *feel* like citizenship. People know that, as we say in Missouri, "I got my rights," and are well aware of how to use the legal system to protect them. Yet, at the end of day, they still feel disconnected from the institutions of our society and convinced deep down that only a gun can allow them to feel truly protected from the forces at large in the world, to be truly someone whose consent must be asked.

I suppose it will hardly be original for me to suggest that the alienation of the modern rights-regarding, gun-toting citizen may stem from the basic psychological individualism of the American idea of rights. People think of their rights as their personal property, and when they defend them, that they are doing no more than protecting their own, even if that is not really true. When others win rights, citizens should see this as victory for all, as Schudson urges, but I am afraid that many do not. Instead, they see rights won by others as property stolen from themselves.[23]

I don't see this changing much if we were to fully embrace Schudson's suggested substitute, "monitorial citizenship," the idea of a citizenry absorbed in private pursuits half-watching the headlines to see if there is something there that requires a reaction. What both the rights-regarding

[23]Schudson, *Good Citizen*, 240-93.

and the monitorial ideals of citizenship lack is a sense of the need for any continuing or *collective* action on the part of citizenry. Schudson's analogy of watching the kids at the community swimming pool is very telling to me. The parent-citizen did nothing actively to have the pool built or maintained, and nobody has hired a lifeguard. He or she is monitoring nothing except his or her own private interests. On most days at the pool, he or she will be required to do little, except perhaps apply sunscreen. With no organized or collective means of monitoring, the child might drown anyway if the parent gets too absorbed in conversation or the latest Stephen King novel.[24]

It seems possible that we may have something to learn from the nineteenth century after all, and here is how I would express what that might be: Even in the darkest days of patronage, bribery, and mindless ballyhoo, the old parties worked against political individualism and oriented people toward collective action, directly and personally connecting them to a vehicle for mass political action. This seems worthwhile, even if the promise was hollow when offered by narrow-minded, morally bankrupt crews like the parties of the 1880s. When nineteenth-century Americans grew disgusted with the political system, their experience with party gave them the political wherewithal to turn to collective action: the Grange, the Knights of Labor, Populism, temperance crusades, and a host of other movements, rather than sterile, politically incoherent individual violence. Even their violence was usually collective and politically pointed (if often misguided), as we can see in the long eighteenth- and nineteenth-century tradition of political riots in American cities, not to mention the rural rebellions that punctuated the early national era.[25]

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[24]Ibid., 311.

[25]Pauline Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution: Colonial Radicals and the Development of American Opposition to Britain, 1765-1776* (1972; reprint, New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 3-26; Paul A. Gilje, *The Road to Mobocracy: Popular Disorder in New York City, 1763-1834* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1987); idem, *Rioting in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); David P. Szatmary, *Shays' Rebellion: The Making of an Agrarian Insurrection* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980); Thomas P. Slaughter, *The Whiskey Rebellion: Frontier Epilogue to the American Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

These older ways of expressing public political alienation strike me as more productive than the forms we know today, when people (especially bitter white males) tend to withdraw or lash out as individuals, rather than rebel in groups, and when the rare efforts that do arise in search of political alternatives end up like the so-called Reform Party: ideologically incoherent, riven by individualism, funded by crackpot billionaires, and wrapped up in mindless celebrity worship. Modern Americans need to learn to be collectively political once again.