A Companion to the Antebellum Presidents
1837-1861

Edited by Joel H. Silbey

WILEY Blackwell

A Companion to the Antebellum Presidents
1837-1861

Joel H. Silbey

While the nation expanded to become a continental power, the decades leading up to the Civil War were turbulent times for America. A Companion to the Antebellum Presidents offers a series of original essays that represent our current historical understanding of the eight US presidents who served between 1837 and the start of the Civil War in 1861.

Foremost constitutions by leading experts in American history, individual readings explore, explain, and evaluate the evolving scholarly reception of Presidents Van Buren, Harrison, Tyler, Polk, Taylor, Fillmore, Pierce, and Buchanan—three who, individually, were regarded as their predecessors and followers. A wide variety of topics and themes are explored, including leadership crises facing the political class, the growing strength of national control, leading ultimately to sectionalism and a civil war. Neither charismatic nor larger than life, these presidents are often characterized as either ordinary men, yet they shaped the direction of the country during a critical period of US history. Through intriguing and scholarly essays, A Companion to the Antebellum Presidents brings new thought and fresh perspectives to the largely forgotten men who served during one of the most decisive quarters centuries of United States history.

"Well-researched and well executed, this historiographical guide to the scholarship on the eight presidents between 1837 and 1865 will prove indispensable to historians. From the brilliant overview by editor Silbey to the prescriptive analysis of Buchanan and Garfield by John Ashworth, it is superb."

John R. Dale, New University
A Companion to the Antebellum Presidents
1837–1861
This series provides essential and authoritative overviews of the scholarship that has shaped our present understanding of the American past. Edited by eminent historians, each volume tackles one of the major periods or themes of American history, with individual topics authored by key scholars who have spent considerable time in research on the questions and controversies that have sparked debate in their field of interest. The volumes are accessible for the non-specialist, while also engaging scholars seeking a reference to the historiography or future concerns.

**Published:**
- *A Companion to the American Revolution* Edited by Jack P. Greene and J. R. Pole
- *A Companion to 19th-Century America* Edited by William L. Barney
- *A Companion to the American South* Edited by John B. Boles
- *A Companion to American Women’s History* Edited by Nancy Hewitt
- *A Companion to American Indian History* Edited by Philip J. Deloria and Neal Salisbury
- *A Companion to Post-1945 America* Edited by Jean-Christophe Agnew and Roy Rosenzweig
- *A Companion to the Vietnam War* Edited by Marilyn Young and Robert Buzzanco
- *A Companion to Colonial America* Edited by Daniel Vickers
- *A Companion to American Foreign Relations* Edited by Robert Schulzinger
- *A Companion to 20th-Century America* Edited by Stephen J. Whitfield
- *A Companion to the American West* Edited by William Deverell
- *A Companion to the Civil War and Reconstruction* Edited by Lacy K. Ford

**In preparation:**
- *A Companion to the U.S. Civil War* Edited by Aaron Sheehan-Dean
- *A Companion to the Meuse–Argonne Campaign, 1918* Edited by Edward G. Lengel
- *A Companion to American Urban History* Edited by David Quigley

**Presidential Companions**

- *A Companion to Franklin D. Roosevelt* Edited by William Pederson
- *A Companion to Richard M. Nixon* Edited by Melvin Small
- *A Companion to Theodore Roosevelt* Edited by Serge Ricard
- *A Companion to Thomas Jefferson* Edited by Francis D. Cogliano
- *A Companion to Lyndon B. Johnson* Edited by Mitchell Lerner
- *A Companion to George Washington* Edited by Edward G. Lengel

- *A Companion to Andrew Jackson* Edited by Sean Patrick Adams
- *A Companion to Woodrow Wilson* Edited by Ross A. Kennedy
- *A Companion to James Madison and James Monroe* Edited by Stuart Leibiger
- *A Companion to Harry S. Truman* Edited by Daniel S. Margolies
- *A Companion to the Antebellum Presidents 1837–1861* Edited by Joel Silbey

- *A Companion to Andrew Jackson* Edited by Sean Patrick Adams
- *A Companion to Woodrow Wilson* Edited by Ross A. Kennedy
- *A Companion to James Madison and James Monroe* Edited by Stuart Leibiger
- *A Companion to Harry S. Truman* Edited by Daniel S. Margolies
- *A Companion to the Antebellum Presidents 1837–1861* Edited by Joel Silbey

**In preparation:**
- *A Companion to Abraham Lincoln* Edited by Michael Green
- *A Companion to Dwight D. Eisenhower* Edited by Chester J. Pach
- *A Companion to Ronald Reagan* Edited by Andrew L. Johns
- *A Companion to the Reconstruction Presidents 1865–1881* Edited by Edward Frantz

- *A Companion to Gerald R. Ford and Jimmy Carter* Edited by V. Scott Kaufman
- *A Companion to Warren G. Harding, Calvin Coolidge, and Herbert Hoover* Edited by Katherine Sibley
- *A Companion to John F. Kennedy* Edited by Marc Selverstone
- *A Companion to First Ladies* Edited by Katherine Sibley
A Companion to the Antebellum Presidents 1837–1861

Edited by

Joel H. Silbey

WILEY Blackwell
# Contents

Notes on Contributors vii

Introduction 1  
*Joel H. Silbey*

## Part I  General Themes 5

1. The Political World of the Antebellum Presidents 7  
*Joel H. Silbey*

2. The Expansionist Impulse in Antebellum America 43  
*M. Philip Lucas*

3. The Rise of Sectional Tensions: Parties, Slavery, and Abolitionism 65  
*Nicole Etcheson*

4. The Antebellum Presidents and Foreign Policy 89  
*Jay Sexton*

## Part II  The Presidents 107

5. Martin Van Buren as Party Leader and at Andrew Jackson’s Right Hand 109  
*M. Philip Lucas*

6. Van Buren and the Economic Collapse of the Late 1830s 131  
*Jonathan M. Atkins*

*William G. Shade*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>President John Tyler, Henry Clay, and the Whig Party</td>
<td>Edward P. Crapol</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>James K. Polk and the Democratic Party</td>
<td>M. J. Heale</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Polk in Office: Domestic Politics and Policies</td>
<td>Paul H. Bergeron</td>
<td>221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Polk as a War President</td>
<td>John C. Pinheiro</td>
<td>245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Polk as a Southern Sectionalist</td>
<td>Michael Todd Landis</td>
<td>269</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Zachary Taylor in Office: Clay, the Whig Party, and the Sectional Crisis</td>
<td>Michael J. Birkner</td>
<td>291</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Millard Fillmore, Whig Politician and Leader of His Party</td>
<td>Damon R. Eubank</td>
<td>309</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>President Fillmore and the Taming of Sectional Tensions</td>
<td>Elizabeth R. Varon</td>
<td>327</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Franklin Pierce, Democratic Partisan</td>
<td>Yonatan Eyal</td>
<td>345</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Franklin Pierce, the Kansas-Nebraska Bill, and the Political Transformation of the Mid-1850s</td>
<td>John F. Kirn, Jr.</td>
<td>367</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>James Buchanan: The Early Political Life of the Old Public Functionary</td>
<td>Jean H. Baker</td>
<td>397</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>James Buchanan, the Slavocracy, and the Disruption of the Democratic Party</td>
<td>James L. Huston</td>
<td>421</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>James Buchanan and the Secession Crisis</td>
<td>John Ashworth</td>
<td>447</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Index</td>
<td></td>
<td>465</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Notes on Contributors

John Ashworth is Professor of American History at the University of Nottingham, England. He is the author of a two-volume study, *Slavery, Capitalism and Politics in the Antebellum Republic* (1995, 2007), the second volume of which won the James A. Rawley Prize for the best work on secession or sectionalism in a two-year period. He has written numerous other books and articles on antebellum history. His latest book is entitled *The Republic in Crisis, 1848–1861* (2012).

Jonathan M. Atkins is Professor of History at Berry College, United States, and the author of *Parties, Politics and the Sectional Conflict in Tennessee, 1832–1861* (1997). He is currently completing a manuscript entitled “The American Union, 1789–1848.”


Paul H. Bergeron is Professor of History Emeritus at the University of Tennessee, United States. He began his professional career at Vanderbilt University, where he taught history, and served as associate editor of *The Correspondence of James K. Polk*, Volumes 1–2. After moving to the University of Tennessee, he authored books on Tennessee politics in the antebellum period and also a study of Polk’s presidency, among other essays and books. Subsequently, he was the editor of *The Papers of Andrew
Johnson, Volumes 8–16. He has recently published Andrew Johnson’s Civil War and Reconstruction (2011).

Michael J. Birkner is Professor of History and Benjamin Franklin Professor of Liberal Arts at Gettysburg College, United States. His publications include Samuel L. Southard: Jeffersonian Whig (1984) and James Buchanan and the Political Crisis of the 1850s (1996). He has co-edited (with Charles M. Wiltse) The Papers of Daniel Webster: Correspondence, 1850–1852, and (with John A. Quist) the forthcoming Disrupted Democracy: James Buchanan and the Coming of the Civil War.

Edward P. Crapol is William E. Pullen Professor of History at the College of William and Mary, United States. He has written America for Americans: Economic Nationalism and Anglophobia in the Late Nineteenth Century (1973); James G. Blaine: Architect of Empire (2000); and a biography of America’s tenth president, John Tyler, the Accidental President (2006). He has also edited Women and American Foreign Policy: Lobbyists, Critics and Insiders (1987).

Nicole Etcheson is Alexander M. Bracken Professor of History at Ball State University, United States. She is the author of A Generation at War: The Civil War in a Northern Community (2011) and Bleeding Kansas: Contested Liberty in the Civil War Era (2004).

Damon R. Eubank is Professor of History at Campbellsville University, United States. He is the author of The Response of Kentucky to the Mexican War, 1846–1848 (2004) and In the Shadow of the Patriarch: The John J. Crittenden Family in War and Peace (2009). An active reviewer and speaker, he is currently working on a study of divided Kentucky families in the Civil War era.

Yonatan Eyal is Assistant Professor of History at the University of Toronto, Canada. He is the author of The Young America Movement and the Transformation of the Democratic Party, 1828–1861 (2007) and articles in scholarly journals.

James L. Huston is Regents Professor at Oklahoma State University, United States. Among his many books he has recently published *Stephen A. Douglas and the Dilemmas of Democratic Equality* (2007) and *Calculating the Value of the Union: Slavery, Property Rights, and the Economic Origins of the Civil War* (2003). He is currently working on the agricultural dimensions of the free labor ideology and sectional conflict.

John F. Kirn, Jr. is Associate Professor of History at John Tyler Community College, United States, where he teaches a course on the Civil War and Reconstruction. He is a student of electoral behavior in the pre-Civil War era, including a study of New York State elections in the run-up to the Civil War.

Michael Todd Landis is Assistant Professor of History at Tarleton State University, United States, and a scholar of nineteenth-century United States history. His current book manuscript, entitled “The Northern Democracy: Slavery, the Democratic Party, and the Destruction of the Union,” is a comprehensive exploration of northern Democrats and northern proslavery sentiment in the 1850s.

M. Philip Lucas is Professor of History at Cornell College, United States. He is the author of several articles on antebellum Mississippi politics and the history of the Fourteenth Amendment. He was a NHPRC fellow for the papers of Andrew Jackson.

Michael A. Morrison teaches at Purdue University, United States. He is the author of *Slavery and the American West: The Eclipse of Manifest Destiny and the Coming of the Civil War* (1997).

John C. Pinheiro is Associate Professor of History at Aquinas College, United States. He has authored *Manifest Ambition: James K. Polk and Civil–Military Relations During the Mexican War* (2007) as well as articles on the early republic. He is currently writing a religious history of the Mexican War.


William G. Shade is Distinguished Professor of History Emeritus, Lehigh University, United States. He is the author or co-author of four books: *Banks or No Banks: The Money Issue in Western Politics, 1832–1865* (1972);

Joel H. Silbey is Professor of History Emeritus at Cornell University, United States. He has published widely on the politics of the antebellum era. Among his most recent books are Martin Van Buren and the Emergence of American Popular Politics (2002); Storm Over Texas: The Annexation Controversy and the Road to Civil War (2005); and Party Over Section: The Rough and Ready Presidential Election of 1848 (2009).

Elizabeth R. Varon is Langbourne M. Williams Professor of History at the University of Virginia, United States. A specialist in the Civil War era and nineteenth-century South, she is the author of We Mean to Be Counted: White Women and Politics in Antebellum Virginia (1998); Southern Lady, Yankee Spy: The True Story of Elizabeth Van Lew, a Union Agent in the Heart of the Confederacy (2003); and Disunion! The Coming of the American Civil War, 1789–1859 (2008).
Each of the eight presidents of the United States who served between 1837 and 1861 held office only a short time: two died quite early in their term, one lost his reelection bid, and four were not renominated for a second term, one, James K. Polk, by his own choice, the others because too many of their erstwhile but now disappointed supporters decided to look elsewhere. These presidents were ordinary men, neither charismatic, nor larger than life, as many of their predecessors (Washington, Jefferson, and Jackson, for example) had been. Seven had come up through the political party system as it developed and took command of the American landscape. They had internalized its values and assumptions and were, as well, seasoned politicians and officeholders within the system. Five – Martin Van Buren, William Henry Harrison, John Tyler, Franklin Pierce, and James Buchanan – had served in the Senate, Polk had been the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Millard Fillmore had been an important Whig Party leader there, and Buchanan, Harrison, Franklin Pierce, and John Tyler served there as well. Van Buren and Buchanan had each been secretary of state, Polk governor of Tennessee. Van Buren and Tyler had also been state governors, Harrison the governor of Indiana Territory. Harrison and the other Whig president, Zachary Taylor, had made their reputation as successful generals while leading their armies in wars against native Americans and Mexicans. (Pierce had also commanded troops in the Mexican–American War.) Finally, Van Buren was acknowledged to be the most accomplished party builder and party manager of his day.
Once in office, whatever the extent of their previous experience in politics and government, none proved to be in the estimation of later scholars particularly distinguished or adept at their tasks during their tenures—only one, Polk, has appeared toward the top of historians’ list of great presidents (and his reputation has gone up and down) (Schlesinger, Sr. 1948; Schlesinger, Jr. 1997; Murray and Blessing 1994). The general public has had an even worse view of these leaders—all eight are at the bottom of its evaluation of all those who have held the office. Nevertheless, each of these presidents, whether strong or weak, was the chief executive of, and led, a nation that was undergoing massive and challenging territorial and population growth as it grew into a continental power. They were confronted by often chaotic economic and social changes and severe economic downturns as well as a range of foreign policy crises, the war against Mexico, and, most of all, the revival and growth of intense sectional tension that threatened to split the Union, all challenges, changes, and threats which would ultimately lead to the weakening of the consensus that had held the Union together.

The presidents faced much and were called upon to do much, defining, planning, convincing, cajoling, ordering, making often difficult choices for appointments to federal offices, working with Congress on legislation and other matters, dealing with and leading the cabinet, strategizing with party leaders, thinking about the federal court system, particularly the Supreme Court, trying to influence their members, and, often, negotiating with state governors as well. As they sat at the top of the nation’s executive branch none were uninvolved as they approached their responsibilities. All were serious men imbued with their party’s policy commitments and desirous of achieving its programmatic vision despite occasional disagreements. Each of them called on their political and leadership skills to deal with internal party factionalism, seemingly intractable issues, and, in the last decade before the Civil War, a political culture degenerating into dangerous sectional polarization. Bringing different degrees of vigor to the tasks before them some did passably well, others much less so. But what they did contributed, along with their administration colleagues, in some fashion to shape the way in which the United States developed in a most decisive quarter century of its history.

Whatever their low evaluation may have been, these presidents have not been ignored by later generations. The era and its presidents have always been of intense interest, bookended as these years were by the excitement of the Jacksonian age on one end and the coming of the Civil War on the other. Scholars have extensively explored the political history of their times, expending an enormous amount of energy establishing a framework for understanding the era in which the presidents operated. They have closely detailed and analyzed the events and direction of the growing nation, with
much more published each year to be, in turn, digested and integrated into our understanding. General narratives covering the whole era after 1837 or significant portions of it such as Daniel Walker Howe’s impressive study of American society, thought, and politics in the early years of the period, Harry Watson’s fine analysis of the politics of the age, and David Potter’s magisterial exploration of the unfolding of the sectional crisis of the 1850s, as well as monographs focusing on particular episodes, a legislative confrontation or a skirmish over foreign policy, or the politics of the economic collapse of 1857 (Howe 2007; Potter 1976; Watson 1990/2006). Studies of both of the main political parties and their third party challengers abound as well. Finally, there are also analyses of the nature of the persistent political argument that underscored all that was occurring as well as the assumptions that lay behind the nation’s political discourse.

In all of these matters the presidents, good and bad, played important roles and are recognized as having done so. Historians have had a great deal to say about them, their function as each conceived it, and their actions. Each president has at least one study of his administration published over the last generation, most of the presidents have received recent biographic treatment as well – some more than one. There are also recent studies of several of the elections that brought them to office. All of this adds up to a daunting amount of information and analyses about a complex and compelling era and its leaders.

The basic outline of what happened between 1837 and 1861 is clear cut in the historiography as the partisan political system took hold and settled in, to be then challenged by the rise of America’s territorial expansion as a major and most divisive issue and the sectionalizing of politics that followed. But, whatever the general scholarly agreement about the era, many aspects of those years remain, not surprisingly, in dispute or not as yet settled to everyone’s satisfaction. In all that has been written, scholars have not always agreed, with subsequent investigators updating and revising what earlier scholars have written as historical currents inevitably change when new evidence, themes, and approaches become part of the narrative, and as new perspectives and interpretative frameworks develop. That is certainly the case in the many accounts about the antebellum presidents.

This volume, like others in the Companion series, focuses largely on recent scholarship to discuss the ongoing debates among historians that have challenged, changed, or deepened our understanding. Most importantly, it is our intention in this collection of essays to bring some clarity and understanding about them out of the sea of books and articles that have appeared in the past several decades, establishing what can be said as to where historians now stand as they view this portion of our past, their areas of agreement, and the nature of the differences among them, that is, what we do know and what we do not, and what remains to be understood.
Sixteen of the essays are divided among each relevant presidential administration, discussing the problems the chief executive faced, how each dealt with them, and how historians subsequently assessed what they tried to do. They are preceded by four essays of general orientation, setting out the larger elements that filled the political landscape in which the presidents acted. The authors, each a specialist in the area covered, seek to trace out the pathways of recent scholarship, delineating the general themes of the era, the critical problems faced by each holder of the office, the explanations offered, and the syntheses that define the existing scholarly narrative and guide current scholarship.

The volume is aimed at a general audience as well as at scholars and students who wish to learn more about the era, inviting them to share in the understandings that have been reached about these leaders and in the recent and continuing debates that have deepened and complicated what we know and how we explain the events of this compelling and critical era and its national leaders.

REFERENCES

Part I

GENERAL THEMES
America’s antebellum presidents operated within a political system that was settling into a well-defined pattern as Martin Van Buren entered the White House. The United States had become a large territorial expanse designed to grow even larger through conquest and treaties. The nation enjoyed a rapidly developing and often socially destabilizing economy stimulated by a transportation (the building of roads, canals, later railroads) and communication (a more effective post office system, the magnetic telegraph, the expansion of print media) revolution which began to overthrow, in Daniel Walker Howe’s words, “the tyranny of distance” as they knit the eastern seaboard with the growing area west of the Appalachian mountain range (Howe 2007: 203). Politically, the nation was contested ground made up of many different interests each seeking to shape a decentralized government system at the federal level and in the states to its advantage and, they argued, to the country’s benefit. During Van Buren’s years in office and in the administration of his successors, two distinct strains defined these divisions and characterized the nation’s formal political world of voters, elections, and government activities in which the president operated: a partisan one dominated by the presence and importance of two national political parties in the public life of the nation, and another, where the force of existing sectional tensions increased dramatically to become a major threat to the nation’s political stability. The long accepted understanding of this world put forward by several generations of historians was rooted in the early twentieth-century scholarship of the most eminent scholars of the era, Frederick Jackson Turner and Charles and Mary Beard and their students.
These “progressive historians” argued that the elements defining the Age of Jackson, that is, its economic and class-conscious themes and egalitarian commitments, were the key to understanding the central political currents of the time, the way that politics was conceived, how voters and parties reacted, how elections were fought, and how Congress, state legislatures, and executive officers went about their business (Beard and Beard 1927; Turner 1920; Hofstadter 1968).

Historians have paid much attention to the strong individuals who confronted one another in these years as they debated America’s future direction. At the center of this confrontation was the people’s hero, Andrew Jackson. Beginning with his ascension to the presidency at the end of the 1820s, an elite-dominated political system rooted in colonial-era and early national attitudes and practices began to give way to newer values, institutions, and behavior. Echoing the claims of the Jacksonians, scholars argued that the presidential election of 1828 was an uprising of the party of the people against entrenched and selfish power. Jackson and his colleagues stirred voters with their populist rhetoric directed against the undemocratic features of America’s government. Against them were powerful groups of opponents led by Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, and their associates promoting different sets of values, policies, and means of governing (Bowers 1922; Remini 1967, 1977–1984).

At their root, the battles echoed many of the confrontations seen earlier between Jeffersonian Republicans and the Federalists, a continuing struggle between eastern commercial elites – bankers and merchants, and their allies – against southern and western farmers, large and small, the latter joined by a growing urban working class who came to the polls to elect Jackson. Then, the aggressive and energizing new president used his office to challenge the status quo by continuing to mobilize the formerly politically dispossessed (because of voting restrictions) against the society’s poorer classes and raise the presidency to new heights of visibility and power in the quest for a more democratic nation. Once Jackson’s policy intentions were clear, two national political parties emerged each representing one of the different social levels involved in this conflict for control, the Jacksonian Democrats, built by those committed to the democratic uprising, and the Whigs, the repository of the power of the nation’s economic and social elites. It was a pattern that continued throughout Jackson’s two terms, as Robert Remini has forcefully argued in many books, as he faced down his opponents as they continued to defend powerful institutions that threatened the rights of the people. The president’s “war” against the Bank of the United States utilized the same stirring rhetoric as in his election campaign and was similarly an aspect of the popular uprising against those who dominated the political world for their own advancement (Remini 1963, 1967).
Jackson’s years in office encompassed more than a crusade for democracy. They also encompassed a welling up of sectional confrontation, first between some of the slave states and the national government over the limits of federal power and the rights of the states, a battle in which the president, as “the tribune of the people” (Silbey 1991: 8), once more railed on behalf of national authority and the preservation of the Union, and, second, between the slaveholding states and antislavery advocates in the North divided over the future of that institution, a confrontation already visible in Jackson’s time. In short, powerful class and sectional elements dominated the political scene from Jackson onward.

The characterization of the Age of Jackson proved to be a compelling narrative about the nature of the United States in this era, one synthesized and powerfully argued by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. in a classic expression of the progressive perspective in which he focused on urban workers as a significant force in the democratic emergence (Schlesinger 1945). All of this provoked, in turn, an enormous amount of scholarship among generations of historians who largely accepted its basic framework in their own work as the key to understanding the antebellum years. As several important reviews of the scholarly literature underline, studies of politics at the state level and the confrontations in Washington added new details fleshing out and reinforcing the story (Sellers 1958; Formisano 1976).

Emergence of a New Synthesis

Despite the widespread acceptance of the progressive synthesis, not everyone was convinced. Scholars such as Thomas Abernethy (1927) and Richard Hofstadter (1948), among others, were skeptical of the progressive historians’ claims, especially of Jackson’s alleged democratic achievements. Their skepticism became more widespread over time until one historian referred to the “dwindling confidence” in its efficacy as an explanation of the American scene (McCormick 1959: 397). Out of these hesitations those unconvinced by the dominant narrative began to bring together and articulate a quite different transformative perspective about the politics of the era, a perspective that was to take increasingly deep root among American historians from the 1960s on. Most of this revisionist scholarship kept to usual research pathways utilizing traditional approaches to historical scholarship to produce biographies and narrative descriptions of momentous events largely based on surviving contemporary documents, politicians’ correspondence, partisan newspapers, and party-generated pamphlets (Formisano 1976). Although such approaches appeared in abundance, and helped to frame a new understanding, there was, in addition, a shift toward a more precise description and analysis of various group roles and behavior
and the forces that underlay them. Much of the challenge to the old orthodoxy was rooted in what came to be described as the new political history that utilized methods and explanations of behavior originating in the social sciences and revealed by the quantitative measurement and analysis of elections and congressional behavior (Bogue 1983).

This work established a description of the American political fabric that has largely been in place since with filling in, clarification, and revisions of some of the points, as new findings were applied and new perspectives developed. Two key books, Lee Benson’s *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy* and *The Second American Party System* by Richard McCormick, set the stage for this reexamination by their direct challenge to, and complicating of, the current understanding. Their description of the political world played down the centrality of Jackson’s role in bringing a new, more democratic, political culture to the nation. There were two prime dimensions to their argument, the way that a different, more powerful, party system originated and grew to define, organize, and invigorate the political world, and a more complex, cross-class pattern to voting and political life generally, which raised, as a result, questions about the limits of sectional forces in American life (Benson 1961; McCormick 1966).

What distinguished McCormick’s study was his in-depth look at party development after 1815, the reasons that they emerged when they did, what the driving forces were that defined them, and how they developed into a dominant configuration characterized by widespread public participation and extraordinary staying power. Once political parties had been seen as fragile and volatile; now, the argument went, they proved able to sustain themselves through their organizational disciplining and ordering skills and the voters’ strong loyalties to them, loyalties that were passed down from generation to generation. Whatever the source of party choice due to the social tensions and ideological differences present in American society, once people joined their party they usually stayed put thereafter, committed, disciplined, and active members of the polity (McCormick 1966; Silbey 1991).

All of this was different from what had been the case earlier when parties were more ephemeral, characterized as they then were by fluid factional combinations and constant shuffling and recombinations among them and by a powerful antiparty ideology held by many Americans which denigrated such institutions as impediments to good government, all of which limited their reach, importance, and permanence. Now, however, the parties’ role and their reach into the fabric of the political world were unlike anything seen before, and the level of loyalty of voters to their party was, similarly, a new phenomenon. McCormick and several colleagues suggested a framework for placing this phenomenon within the whole course of American party history, dividing the whole into different systems each of them with
distinct characteristics that differed from one another. In this scheme, developed most extensively by the political scientist Walter Dean Burnham, the antebellum period from the late thirties into the fifties, that is, the era of the “second American party system,” was particularly marked by the unprecedented extensive participation of the politically involved, voters and leaders, and the acceptance of their necessity and permanence in the political world (Burnham and Chambers 1967; Hofstadter 1969; Wallace 1968; Burnham 1970; Silbey 1985, 1991).

Unlike the parties that developed after 1790, the Whigs and Democrats were nationwide in reach, appeal, and organization, important in both slave states and free states, in the West as on the eastern seaboard, closely competitive in many places, drawing support across the social spectrum. The Democrats largely dominated the era at the polls (between 1837 and 1861, they controlled the presidency two-thirds of the time and largely dominated Congress as well). But they were always vigorously challenged by their Whig opponents who, after some hesitation, accepted the necessity of parties and adapted themselves to them. To be sure, not all Americans were committed to one or the other of the two main parties. There were always outliers who did not fit into the dominant partisan framework. But the overwhelming number of those who voted were. On election day party dominance was the most compelling aspect of the situation (Silbey 2001; Shade 1981).

McCormick’s research pointed out that, contrary to the progressive narrative, voter turnout did not surge when Andrew Jackson appeared on the scene. States had been liberalizing their voter eligibility laws for some time, with a large increase in those permitted to participate at the polls including the propertyless at the lower reaches of the social scale, an increase that made almost all adult white males eligible to vote by 1840. In the 1828 presidential election there was no “mighty democratic uprising” in Jackson’s favor from the newly enfranchised (McCormick 1960: 293). In the two elections in which Jackson had run, turnout at the polls, while higher than in earlier presidential contests, was exceeded by the numbers coming to the polls in state-level contests before Jackson’s alleged democratic mobilization campaigns. The surge at the presidential level occurred later when the political parties organized and faced one another in harshly fought elections and voters turned out in impressive numbers in both state and national contests at a higher rate, in percentage terms, than when Jackson originally ran. This led McCormick to focus attention on party maturation and their organized voter turnout efforts as the key to the increase in political involvement. At every level, voters had to be convinced to do the right thing on election day. Election could go either way and there was too much at stake not to get your supporters to the polls. As McCormick sums up, after 1828, “as balanced organized parties subsequently made their appearance from
state to state, and voters were stimulated by the prospect of a genuine contest, [at the presidential level] a marked rise in voter participation occurred” (McCormick 1960: 301).

What gave the parties their strength, Roy Nichols argued, was their success in drawing voters to them due to their determined connecting with the voters through their circus-like arousal qualities and their strong, convincing statements about their policies as the best means to attain what the voters wanted and the nation needed. They held different perspectives on the nation’s problems and about the solutions necessary to address them, and unstintingly argued for them on the hustings, in Congress, and at the state level. All of this deepened commitment and polarization. Campaigning for the presidency such as the “Hurrah campaign” of 1840 and many others as well changed the way that Americans approached and understood their politics, what was at stake, and what they should do (Gunderson 1957; Nichols 1967).

Party leaders played a key role in this emerging system mostly at the state level. They were the center of most political activity. Fully embedded in the political apparatus, they were both representatives of their parties’ values and policies and an important participant in carrying through on them, formulating campaign strategy, helping to choose candidates, getting out the party’s message, and dispensing patronage in the interest of their party. Most of all, they focused on the voters, seeking to direct them to behave in a disciplined manner on behalf of their party. The leaders did not oversee elaborate nationwide or state-level organizations, relying mainly on volunteer loyalists at the local community and state levels to carry out the necessary tasks. It was not until 1848 that a party national committee made up of representatives from each state was organized to correlate Democratic activities across the nation. As usually was the case with organizational matters, the Whigs followed behind their opponents (Nichols 1967).

Even without many formal connecting institutions, national and state organizations were more interrelated than at earlier times by their advocacy, needs, and common commitments. Party conventions of delegates “fresh from the people,” as Jackson labeled them (Jackson 1835), appeared at every political level from local and state to national meetings in presidential years when party members from across the country named their candidates and united their supporters behind a platform setting forth their principles and intentions. Each party developed a new, more raucous, and polarizing campaigning style to attract the numerous voters now part of the system and to ensure the full turnout of their supporters on election day. They spent an enormous amount of effort defining themselves and their opponents in their rallies, campaign speeches, and pamphlets circulated to the faithful. Their gospel and claims were transmitted widely by a network of partisan newspapers such as the Washington Globe and New York Tribune.
and hundreds of others throughout the nation. Their rhetoric was harsh, their images gross, their claims and accusations inflated. When candidates, including those running for president, were nominated, they could expect merciless treatment from the opposition press and from its stump speakers (Shade 1981; Silbey 1991).

The recognition of the importance of the party leadership in all of these activities was underlined by the fact that state party leaders often rose to high offices in their states and at the national level due to their organizational and managerial competence, their loyalty, and their commitment, rather than because of any claims to their statesmanlike qualities. Whatever their talents, the presidents who followed Jackson no longer had the credentials of statesmen, that is, the experience in national and international affairs that their predecessors had had. As acknowledged partisan leaders the presidents were caught up in the extension of a partisan political culture and its contentious qualities.

This second American party system was a relatively stable one with the dominance of the two parties recognized by all but a small band of challengers. But all was not smooth sailing for party leaders. They had to deal with frequent internal disagreements as different factions struggled over specific policies, priorities, and preferred candidates. Such factional differences affected state parties and disturbed the smooth functioning of the national conventions as they sought to bring all together, differences party leaders hoped would end once the campaign began. Usually they were, occasionally they were not. The running sore between the Barnburner and Hunker factions bedeviled the New York Democrats in the 1840s for one prominent example. Massachusetts Whigs split into “Conscience” and “Cotton” factions over their different positions on slavery extension in the same years. Some state parties, such as the Pennsylvania Democrats, were bedeviled by personal factions waging war against one another over their support for different leaders (Eyal 2007; Brauer 1967; Snyder 1958).

These moments of division excited many, were often difficult to reconcile, and a number threatened party fortunes in particular elections. But, no matter how much party leaders found themselves hamstrung and frustrated, these factional divisions did not alter the partisan climates until other matters interceded in the 1850s. Party members remained loyal, their behavior primarily influenced by the party label on election day, and acted accordingly. There was usually a close relation between who voted for each party from election to election (Silbey 1991).

The outliers who did not fit into the dominant partisan framework included contemporary advocates of the centrality of sectional issues in both North and South who sharply differed with the partisan direction of American politics. John C. Calhoun, often an officeholder and presidential hopeful, who spent time in both the Democratic and Whig
parties, but who feared and distrusted both, more often acted to build alternative coalitions in favor of defending states’ rights against federal power or, later, the South against its enemies (Freehling 1965; Wiltse 1944–1951; Cooper 1978, 1983).

Minor, less permanent third parties of various kinds appeared from time to time, some original creations, others as splinters from the two main parties striking out on their own: the Anti-Masons, the People’s, the Liberty, various urban working men’s organizations, the Free Soil, and, later, the Know Nothing, participated from time to time in both local and national elections. At some moments minor parties seemed to have enough support, not to win a particular contest but to affect the outcome of an election or two. Despite that, most voters behaved as committed Whigs and Democrats on election day whatever the efforts of factionalists and third-party dissidents (Voss-Hubbard 2002; Formisano 2008; Silbey 2009; Wilentz 1984).

Not all Americans were fully accepted as part of the emerging partisan nation. So far as the formal political arena was concerned, the United States was largely a white man’s republic, although both women and, to a lesser extent, blacks were involved in political life in a range of ways outside the ballot box from which they were barred. In the years after 1837, in a nation where only men could vote, many women came into the political world by their own efforts on behalf of certain issues. As many scholars of women’s involvement point out, they had a lot on their minds in this era. Some acted primarily outside formal political activity, persistently working in various reform movements. Others went further. Much of what they did included their immersion in formal politics as they sought government action to meliorate unacceptable conditions. They worked hard to convince legislators through petitions, editorials, and direct confrontation to extend suffrage rights to women, while Dorothea Dix played an important role pressuring Congress as it debated and passed a bill to provide federal funds for asylums for the insane and in trying to persuade presidents to sign it when it passed (President Pierce vetoed it) (Keyssar 2000; Ginzberg 1990; Hewitt 1984; Brown 1998). As Karen Offen has summed up this research, “the history of feminism as political history necessarily embraces women’s ongoing quests for educational equity, economic opportunity, civil rights and political inclusion” (Offen 2011: 22).

Blacks, too, although not permitted to vote (although some states had allowed them to do so earlier), did actively participate in lobbying of legislators and other forms of political agitation such as pamphleteering and occasionally even speaking in public on behalf of their great cause, the abolition of slavery. These moments of participation for both blacks and women were obviously limited but did play some role in the development of the nation’s political culture (Keyssar 2000; McFeely 1991; Silbey 2009).
In the *Concept of Jacksonian Democracy* Lee Benson also took aim at the progressive perspective, arguing that politics from the 1820s on was less embedded in an Age of Jackson and its alleged striving to expand democracy to include the common man, whatever the contemporary rhetoric voiced and claims made. Like McCormick, he based his analysis on quantitative evidence, election returns, and census data, while also using social science concepts and traditional literary evidence to explain what the numbers meant. Most of the time, he argued, politics was filled with constant conflict as the progressive historians argued. But such conflict did not primarily incorporate and reflect socioeconomic divisions based on wealth and occupation between a social and economic elite and the common folk (Benson 1961).

There was always a certain amount of class tension and resentment expressed by editors and speakers – of both parties – as well as by members of minor parties. Some voters expressed such attitudes when they went to the polls. But that did not translate into a clear pattern governing behavior on election day or in legislative assemblies when they met. When New York enfranchised previously ineligible poorer elements in the state in the 1820s, each “did not upset the political balance by throwing his weight heavily on the side of one party. Either he did not vote, or he showed as much preference for one party as the other” (McCormick 1959: 409). There were always anomalies but whatever class consciousness existed in American life, its impact on voting and legislative activity was sporadic. When economic matters influenced behavior, they were largely over differences between people in commercial areas and those in less economically developed places (Benson 1961; Howe 2007; Watson 1990).

For all of their populist exhortations and claims, therefore, Benson argued, the Democrats were not a class-based party. Nor were their rivals. Although the Whigs were more hesitant about it than the party of Jackson, the Whigs, too, came to accept what Benson labeled “the Age of Egalitarianism” with its dominant egalitarian values and political style and the need, therefore, given the great increase in the number of eligible voters, to play the populist political game to attract voters across class lines as they sought victory on election day (Benson 1961; Gunderson 1957).

Finally, most political leaders were largely drawn from the upper reaches of society as they had always been. Even the Jacksonians, whatever their claims, and whatever historians have said about their appeal to the common man and the nature of Jacksonian constituencies, did not come to their leadership positions simply by being from the lower orders of society themselves. Like their Whig opponents, they were lawyers, newspaper editors and proprietors, plantation owners, and similar types – rich and middling sorts and local notables as political leaders had traditionally been. Some activists did struggle through to leadership positions from further down the
social order but not many—and by the time they arrived they had risen into the wealthier classes as professional men, merchants, and similar types (Benson 1961; Pessen 1984; Kutolowski 1989; Wooster 1969, 1975).

If the progressive model of parties, their leaders, and voters does not conform to what was actually the case in this period, the obvious question remains what motivated the parties and their loyal supporters? There has been much scholarly research completed and many interesting ideas offered about the impulses driving politicians and voters to act as they did. McCormick had stressed the party leaders’ office-seeking goals as their primary motivation. They were not as ideologically driven as suggested by earlier scholars. On the other hand, while this was an important element—the parties did focus much attention on winning elections—Benson argued that their efforts had a larger purpose as well. He was interested in how the entire social context of the nation—America’s political geography—shaped outlooks and behavior. He, too, suggested that popular voting was not neatly rooted in a single causative element dividing Americans that overrode all else. America’s cultural heterogeneity, its socioeconomic diversity, the mix of cleavages present, all affected by the context of the moment, and modified by local variations, reflected and defined the variety of competing interests involved in American elections in the antebellum era. Most critically, he underscored the continuing importance of the endemic tensions between different ethnoreligious groups as the key indicator of popular political choice. But he did not limit political behavior to that single factor despite the importance that he attributed to it (Benson 1961; Formisano 1976). Other scholars developed and extended Benson’s argument. Richard Carwardine has pointed out that evangelical Protestants had strong religious outlooks and commitments which filtered into their party choice. He, Robert Kelley, and Daniel W. Howe argued that, like economic interest groups, ethnoreligious groups had political interests that they wished to advance or defend, and they did so through their voting behavior. Party differences were based on existing and long-standing hostility among different groups in society emerging from deeply rooted prejudices among diverse religious and national groups, including their different perceptions of acceptable behavior, differences over how America was to be defined, and who was (or should be) an American. Certain traditional ethnoreligious groups, practicing evangelical Protestants, those from Anglo-Saxon backgrounds, and many non-Catholic Germans wished to promote a moral society, with its institutions driving out what they considered to be irrational and dangerous forces threatening the nation’s future. Benson and others concluded that their conflicts and political behavior had to be taken seriously in order to understand American politics in the antebellum era (Benson 1961; Formisano 1976; Carwardine 1993; Swierenga 1990; Kelley 1970).
The work originated by McCormick and Benson, in Formisano’s words, “was to shake dramatically the conventional faith in economic determinism in explaining voting” (Formisano 1976: 59). As their counternarrative emerged, it was elaborated and anchored by a range of studies that developed and enlarged their findings. A number of scholars engaged in state-level studies that tested the ideas in different places. Ronald Formisano’s studies of Michigan and Massachusetts, and William Shade’s work on Illinois and Virginia were important extensions of the rising understanding. They, too, confirmed that most voter choice was shaped by party identification based, in turn, on such matters as family tradition and their cultural identity and values, often ethnoreligious in origin, as well as their distinct outlooks toward the role of the government in the economy (Formisano 1971; Shade 1972). Other scholars looked to the South. Both Marc Kruman and Harry Watson looked South and found similar impulses present in North Carolina (Kruman 1983; Watson 1981). These “careful local studies,” Howe argued, “indicate that such [party] membership was often determined by a combination of mutually reinforcing moral and economic motives” (Howe 1991: 1228).

These commitments existed side by side with the other causative factors present. In Howe’s comprehensive study of the first half of the antebellum era he describes the importance of both ethnoreligious divisions and different economic interests in shaping not only party identification, but popular voting as well, the relative importance of each depending on the situational contest in which an election was held. He clarified how these elements operated in what he labeled a cultural approach to political analysis which “would lead us to view party affiliation as a function of membership in a community sharing common values” (Howe 1991: 1228). In action the political parties reflected and represented different perspectives, distinct and contrasting approaches, and what policies were needed to achieve the kind of nation they envisioned, a reality that attracted different groups to each.

Evangelical Christians sought to impose their values and ways of behaving on other groups, often through government actions at the federal, state, and local levels. They pushed for legislation to reform schools, restrict the use of alcoholic drinks because of their debilitating impact on individuals, and to limit immigration, all directed against other religious and ethnic groups, especially Irish Catholics. They sought vigorous policymaking in the economic realm as well, arguing for a strong national authority promoting development through a national bank, tariffs, and internal improvements legislation to develop the nation’s transportation network. Many of them would use the same authority to limit or end slavery. Generally, these groups joined the Whigs, a party that believed in the need for a strong central authority to uplift America economically and
The Whigs were, in Howe’s words, “agencies of modernization.” They promoted a disciplined society as necessary for the good of the nation’s progress (Howe 1991: 1217).

Those being pushed pushed back. The Democrats, who drew support from groups antagonistic to the evangelical and modernizing impulses of the Whigs, were traditionalist in their approach to society and government. They believed in, and sought to limit, the authority of the federal government on all aspects of the domestic scene. They saw no need for a range of moral legislation that limited individual and community rights to live as one pleased. They strongly objected to such government interference in personal matters and behavior, religion, schooling, and activities such as alcohol consumption. In the economic realm, many were skeptical of commercial activity as threatening to their values and the way of life most Americans wished to pursue. They demanded policies that usually privileged the states over federal authority, were hostile to banks and special privileges for commercial groups, resisted high tariffs to promote certain interests over others, and were, in general, against the federal government doing things that the states or private interests did such as the financing of internal improvements (Benson 1961; Collins 1977; Howe 1991: Gerring 1994).

At the same time, Democrats believed in a strong presidency. In their eyes the president was “the tribune of the people” representing each American’s interests and defending their liberties and the nation’s virtue against those who would act against the rights of the people. In contrast, Whigs feared “the menace of Caesar,” that is, the overreaching power of a too ambitious president. Conscious of the fragility of liberty throughout history where earlier republics had been overthrown by strong, often military, leaders, they wanted the American president to be closely monitored and reined in by the legislative branch (Holt 1999).

Historians have noted how the federal government focused on nation building and development in this era: territorial expansion and organization, legislation making federal-owned land available for settlement after removing the Indian tribes from them, and the developing of a transportation network linking the growing nation, first roads and canals (although state and local governments usually did more than the national one in these efforts), then the subsidizing of railroad construction as well as financing water transport improvements. In Congress economic development issues made up the agenda of both parties: rivers and harbors legislation, banking, and the tariff all were prominent in both Whig and Democratic platforms and campaigns and came into Congress for resolution (Taylor 1951; Goodrich 1960; McCormick 1986; Larson 2001; Alexander 1967; Silbey 1967).

This focus raised questions about some of the arguments seeking to explain popular voting. How could a politics largely rooted in local interests,